

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS ***Life of Archdeacon Habib Guirguis*** ***(1876-1951)***

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The last decades of the nineteenth century were bitter years for the Coptic Church which was still struggling hard out of the darkness of the Middle Ages. Pope Kyrillos IV (1855-1861) accomplished many projects during his short patriarchate. He established a Coptic high school in Cairo next to the Patriarchate, for which he appointed the best available professors. He opened a school for girls, the first of its kind in Egypt. He built several new churches. He bought a printing press for the Church from Austria. In addition, he conducted regular weekly educational meetings with the clergy, in anticipation of opening a theological school. His sudden death, as a martyr, in January 1861 put an end to his reforms.

Some pessimistic historians said after the death of Kyrillos IV, “The luck and destiny of the Copts were buried with the burial of this man.” Indeed, in the following years, things went from bad to worse. Negligence and lack of education among the clergy made the people an easy target for foreign missions who failed to get Moslem converts. In all Egypt there was only one Coptic priest who was able to preach. Financial problems left the poor of the Church without assistance, and the Patriarchate could not pay the salaries of its employees. Eminent Coptic laymen organized themselves in a trial to improve things. In 1874 they succeeded in forming the first Coptic Council of Laymen (the “*Maglis Milli*”). Also, at their request, a seminary for the clergy was opened, only to close its doors after a few months. And, as if things were not bad enough, conflicts arose between the Patriarch Kyrillos V and the Lay Council, climaxing in the temporary exile of the Patriarch to the Monastery of Al-Baramos in 1892.

Light Shone in the Darkness

Amidst this darkness grew the idea of a new theological school. Its rule was endorsed by the Lay Council in July 1893, and a member of the Council, Hanna Bey Pachom was authorized to choose its pupils from those attending the Coptic High School. The first to respond was the young Habib Guirguis.

Habib Guirguis was born in Cairo in 1876. Both his parents came originally from Upper Egypt. His father, Guirguis Mankarious was a government official in the Ministry of Interior. He died in 1882 at the age of forty-five, leaving his widow, two sons and a daughter. One can feel the influence of a devout mother on the young Habib who as a child became a reader in the church, and at the age of seventeen dedicated himself to the service of God. He later described his call to join the seminary, "Those were joyful, happy, glorious and sweet moments."

The new theological school which Habib Guirguis joined in November 1893 taught Arabic, Coptic, history, geography, hymns, mathematics, and homiletics. Ironically there was no teacher of religion or theology in the school. Its principal, Youssef Bey Mankarious was not a theologian. He used to choose some books of religion which he let the students read in class. The students complained to the Patriarch and to the Lay Council asking them to appoint a teacher of religion. Some Coptic magazines wrote about the subject. Even some Coptic societies suggested to fill the vacancy with a Protestant teacher; even this could not be accomplished. After four years without a teacher of religion, most of the students who had entered the school hoping to get religious education, left it. Later a priest was appointed to teach religion, and was soon fired when it was found that his knowledge of Orthodoxy was poor.

Under these circumstances, Habib Guirguis, still a student, was appointed to teach religion to his fellow students. To get some help Habib used to go to the house of the old priest, Father Philotheos Ibrahim, who had been a disciple of Pope Kyrillos IV. He spent days and nights in the library of the Patriarchate to prepare his lessons.

A Church Man

From the moment Habib Guirguis entered the seminary in 1893 till he died in 1951, his life was totally dedicated to the service of God. He worked in various fields, alone and with others, aiming at the reformation of the Coptic community. Yet he had only one road to pass through. He wrote in 1923, "Those who sought reformation differed in their paths. Some thought that it was in education alone. Others asked for it in the Council of Laymen. Others restricted it to something else. All of them forgot that all these are crooked paths which have a long way to go, and that the only short and straight way to proper reformation is the Church." He also wrote, "I am delighted to declare that I love my Church, and that I am ready to shed for her sake the last drops of my blood." One of his students wrote about him, "I never saw him smiling except for some benefit that came to the Church, nor did I see him sad except for an evil that struck it. He was occupied only with its business, always reading nothing but its Book and its laws. He walked only in its way, thought only of it, hoped only for its progress, aimed only at its happiness. He worked for it, lived for it, and died in its service."¹

The Seminary as the Corner Stone

Habib Guirguis started by teaching the teachers and priests in the theological school. Before him the school occupied a small old house, which was poorly furnished. The students were accepted without any qualifications and at different ages. As a result the curriculum of the school was at the elementary education level. Although Habib Guirguis remained only a teacher of theology till 1918, yet he was the center of all activities in the school. In 1918 he became its principal, a position he occupied till his death. Habib had to fight in order to improve the condition of the school and of its students. It moved to different places in Cairo, till during his lifetime it finally moved to its present place in Anba Ruais, where the great Cathedral of St. Mark was later built. In the 1930's he opened a higher theological school for those who finished High School. In 1945 he established a graduate school. With its evening classes this school attracted a large number of university graduates who wished to serve their Church, or increase their theological knowledge.

Homilist

Except for Father Philotheos Ibrahim there were no Coptic preachers in the nineteenth century. In 1898 Habib Guirguis started to preach in Cairo. His sermons attracted the people who were hungry for the word of God, and for the next five years he had to travel all over the country proclaiming the good news and spreading the faith. Money poured upon him in every place. With this the Patriarchate bought several hundreds of acres of land which it dedicated to the service of the seminary. The Patriarch, Pope Kyrillos V, loved Habib and made him his archdeacon and appointed him as a preacher in the Cathedral.

Sunday Schools

Before the turn of the century, Coptic children and youth received no religious education. In the year 1900 Habib Guirguis started by gathering the children in some of the churches of Cairo and teaching them their faith. Later he had to ask the help of the teachers and students of the theological school and other volunteers in order to establish new classes in other churches and societies in Cairo, Alexandria and the major Egyptian cities. In 1918 he formed the central committee of Sunday Schools. He was the most active figure of the committee which was responsible for preparing the curricula and the picture lessons which were printed in Germany, and for extending the work by opening new branches even in small cities and villages. For years it was not easy to convince the Church leaders, the priests and the parents of the importance of Sunday Schools. But through his prayers, tears, and continuous activity, Habib Guirguis lived to see Sunday School classes in every church of Egypt. They became the centers of spiritual activity, with classes for every grade, youth meetings, meetings for the teachers and prayer groups. Bishops attended Sunday School conferences and the successive Patriarchs blessed the work and prayed for its success.

Christian Teaching in Public Schools

Early in the twentieth century the only religion taught in Egyptian public schools was Islam which was forced upon Christian students. In 1907 Coptic leaders officially asked the Ministry of Education for the right of Christian children to be taught their own religion. With their insistence the government reluctantly endorsed the idea. At the same time it raised several obstacles which the Copts tried to resolve. At first the government refused to give any financial support. No teachers for Christian religion were appointed, nor would the government contribute any money to compensate outside teachers. The Patriarchate offered to pay for the teachers, and the Patriarch asked Habib Guirguis to choose the teachers from among Coptic lay preachers. Then came the problem of the schedules; the government insisted that the Christian lessons might not be part of the school day but should be given after hours. Finally the whole project was killed when the government discovered that it would have no authority over teachers whose salaries it did not pay. It offered an alternative solution. Christian teachers of secular subjects might volunteer to teach religion. The government thought the teachers would refuse, because this would be additional work for them and, more important, most of them had never received any Christian education themselves. Habib Guirguis then met those teachers and with his persuasion they accepted the responsibility. He also took upon himself the task of preparing the curriculum. In 1909 he issued his three-volume book, "A Synopsis of the Essentials of Faith in the Doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church." Later when Christian religion was introduced as a subject in secondary schools, Habib was chosen in the committee for preparing a new curriculum. New books had to be written, and in 1937 "Essentials of Orthodox Christianity" by Habib Guirguis appeared in eight volumes for eight grades of primary and secondary schools.

However it must be stated that the battle for teaching Christian religion in schools was not won. Actually it has not been won till now. Without teachers who have theological training, the Egyptian government has made sure that any teaching of Christian religion in schools is fruitless and ineffective.

Author and Theologian

During his life Habib Guirguis published thirty books. These were the books needed by the people for their daily spiritual and Church life. They included a series of four books on Bible studies; books on liturgy and Church songs; lives of saints; and spiritual books. His two great theological works, "The Orthodox Rock" and "The Seven Sacraments of the Church" have been reprinted several times.

However the main publishing event of Habib Guirguis was his monthly periodical *Al-Karmah* (The Vine) which has been considered as a school by itself. One of his disciples later wrote, "If you can read the seventeen volumes of *Al-Karmah* you will find wisdom and philosophy; deep spirituality; science and religion combined together; theology and history; legislation and law; news and comments; all written in a sober palatable style and in a strong pious language."² The articles were written

or translated by well known lawyers, officials, theologians, and other churchmen whose names are still remembered several decades after their death. With sections on patristic writings, biographies of Church Fathers and of modern Coptic personalities, treasures of the Patriarchate library and book reviews, the magazine looks up-to-date even now. Some of its articles were later collected and published as separate books. However, *Al-Karmah* was totally dependent on Habib Guirguis. He was its owner, editor and publisher. The first issue appeared in 1904. In the fourth year it was interrupted for six months when Habib was sick, and after the eighth year he stopped it for lack of subscriptions. But he did not accept defeat and tried again in 1923 and nine more volumes appeared, till in 1931 he finally had to give up, when he could not handle its financial losses; he was a poor man although he had the talents to become one of the richest. Although many Christian periodicals appeared since then, the loss of *Al-Karmah* has not been replaced. Its volumes are still treasured by many libraries and individuals.

Great Reformer

I have to pass over the activities of our great teacher in such fields as the Lay Council for which he was elected for three consecutive terms and the several welfare societies which he started or in which he was an active member. His saintly character was apparent to all who worked with him, and as a teacher he taught by his life more than he did by his words. As a man of prayer, his faith and hope stood against all obstacles, he knew no despair. He had no enemies as he loved all and was loved by all.

In Retrospect

But it was not an easy or a successful life which Habib Guirguis led. Pope Shenouda III writes, "He worked in a generation of ignorance, corruption, darkness and stinginess." Another disciple of his writes after his death, "The great teacher has failed in his reform . . . ; but he failed where shortcoming and failure are considered an honor. It was the failure of a martyr."³

Three times his friends tried to make him a candidate for the Patriarchate and three times they failed. Several dioceses wanted him as their bishop and every time things went wrong. The great teacher had to fight for any improvement needed in the theological school, and sometimes even for its existence. Till his death the seminary was a dead end for many students; most bishops did not accept them as priests, they were not accepted to teach religion in schools, nor could they become members of the Lay Council. During the last sickness of Habib Guirguis, the Lay Council ordered the closure of the graduate theological school.

On August 21, 1951 Habib Guirguis slept in the Lord. A Cairo priest, speaking in his funeral service, said, "Although he was an archdeacon, yet we priests acknowledge him as a father. The bishops also see in him a guide and an honest adviser."

Source: Nazir Gayid,
"Then God Said, Let there
be Light" *Majalla Madaris
al-Ahad* 5, 9/10 (1951): 5.

He did not live to see many of his disciples as bishops in the Church, and even one of them occupying the See of St. Mark. No doubt, he is the teacher of the generation in the Coptic Church.

Notes

- (1) Father Mankarious Awadalla in his Arabic periodical, *Teachings of the Church* (1951). He is now the Coptic priest in Ottawa, Ontario.
- (2) F. Basily: Habib Guirguis: Preacher and Author. *The Bulletin of Sunday Schools. Cairo*, 1951; Volume 5: No. 9, 10. (The author, later ordained a priest by the name of Fr. Boulos Basily, was among those arrested by the present Egyptian regime in 1981 and, among eight bishops and more than twenty priests, has been prevented from returning to his pastoral duties with no charge whatsoever.)
- (3) Morad Wahba: The Ascetic. *The Bulletin of Sunday Schools. Cairo*, 1951; Volume 5: No. 9, 10.