



Green Pilgrim City Theological Message

Pilgrimage in the Coptic Church

Since its establishment in the first century, the Coptic Orthodox Church has existed in Egypt and has as one of its principal pillars a movement and way of life that commenced in her deserts and wildernesses and, from there, spread to the whole world. This phenomenon is, of course, the monastic movement that started in the deserts of Egypt in the third Century and still thrives across the country until today.

Being central to the lives of many Christians in Egypt and abroad, the monasteries are frequented by pilgrims throughout the year, who reach their thousands on special feast days in the Coptic Calendar. The monasteries have always been essential for spiritual retreat, and in the current climate, have become visitors' havens of reflection, contemplation and refuge in the midst of a bustling society embattled by historic political reform and the accompanying security and economic pressures

Today, thousands of Coptic Christians from across Egypt and around the world make the journey to the monasteries to escape the constant noise of modern life and to share in the gentle silence of the wilderness that our desert fathers and mothers have lived for centuries, experiencing the words of our Creator Himself Who says "be still and know that I am God" (Psalms46:10). These pilgrims are also accompanied by many thousands of non-Coptic visitors throughout the year.

The deserts, void of the heavy distractions of civilisation and unblemished by large secular settlements, have been the rich soil from which great wisdom has sprung forth. It was from these deserts that Saint Antony, founder and father of the monastic movement, realised a pure struggle for a life with God. This became the monastic tradition, birthed in Egypt, which was then shared across the world. It is in this context that the Natroun Valley has played host to teachings in meditation and wisdom that have blossomed from many who have enjoyed its seclusion including Saint Arsanious, Saint John the Dwarf, Saint Macarius of Egypt, Saint Macarius of Alexandria, Saint Bishoy, Saint Poimen the Great and Saint Samuel the Confessor. The monasteries provide an opportunity for pilgrims to share in this tradition of reflection, be it with day visits or overnight retreats, and be partakers of that same tradition of spirituality.

The naturally dry and arid landscape of Wadi El-Natroun also serves as a nest within which closeness with God is incubated; St. Bishoy, the founder and patron of the monastery, was known for the love, wisdom and simplicity he fostered among his brothers. This same environment also presents a significant struggle however, and that is, how to provide for the hundreds of monks who live in the monasteries, as well as the labourers who work with them, and the thousands who visit their holy places.

For the Church in Egypt, and her children, the Wadi El-Natroun is a lasting statement of our survival in the Middle East, and a source of enduring hope in the face of fiery trials. The sanctuary of the Natroun Valley is, for the Coptic Orthodox Church, an anointed haven officiated by the blood of her martyrs who faithfully trust the voice of God.

Theological Statement

The belief of the Coptic Orthodox Church is that all life is sacred, and is created and sustained by God in love. The world was crafted by God for humankind, whom He only brought into being once He saw that all "was good." Nature has been a source of both provision and refuge for humanity against the self-made worries and concerns of life. Isaiah the prophet escaped fear and persecution in the wilderness under a broom tree where he rested and was fed and cared for by the angel of the Lord (1 Kings 19). It is in nature that God often chooses to talk to those who will listen to Him, as Moses met with God in a cloud on a mountain (Exodus 19), and spoke with God in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). Similarly, Jonah the prophet held dialogue with God through his experience of a plant and worm (Jonah 4).

We believe that God, having dominion over all nature, garners a relationship with us. It is through the awesome power of a storm that the Lord demonstrated His majesty to his disciples (Matthew 8:23), and taught faith to Peter by calling him to walk on water (Matthew 14). As David the Psalmist expresses, our relationship with God is most likened to "walking beside the still waters and laying down in green pastures" (psalm 23). And it is in nature, away from distraction, that a closeness with God can be achieved; the example of Christ meditating in the wilderness, is one emulated in the monastic life. The true value of nature can be measured in Christ's choice to pass His final hours on this earth, in the Garden of Gethsemane in spiritual preparation (John18:1).

We also believe that God, Who created our natural world, also looks to teach us through His creation. The most prevalent source of teaching in the Bible is the example of nature, as Saint John the Evangelist reminds us with the parables of

our Lord, demonstrating that spiritual life must be well rooted in good soil, sufficiently nourished, and lovingly sustained in order to yield its fruit.

The task of stewardship over this great source of peace and wisdom is given to us as children of God. In the same way that "God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (Genesis 2:15) so must we too be diligent looking after this precious gift. In the same way that God commanded Noah, saying "every beast of the earth, on every bird in the air, on all that moves on the earth and on all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand" (Genesis 9:2), so we too share that same responsibility for and over God's creation.

In His divine wisdom, the Lord God, our Creator, engineered a harmonious world, made up of numerous systems that were so finely balanced within themselves and with one another that all were provided for and nothing was forgotten, not even the "ravens and the young beasts." Saint Gregory of Nazianzus writes that 'The Creation is a system and composite of earth and sky and all that is in them... harmony and unison of the whole, and how each part fits with every other in fair order, and all with the whole, tending to the perfect completion of the world as a unit'. In such a world, according to God's plan and without negative human intervention, there would be no hunger, poverty, or destruction of a beautiful environment.

As the stewards of our Lord Jesus Christ and His partners in the ministry, we have a responsibility towards every person and every creature. While it is understandable that we are responsible for every human being, we sometimes forget our very serious responsibility for that which surrounds him and for that which forms an integral part of God's Creation: the world and the nature therein.

In considering the environment, we find ourselves in a very real partnership, not merely with human organisations and bodies, but with the Creator and Master Craftsman Himself. We find ourselves in the place of Noah, with whom God not only entrusted his own family, but every creature that was in the ark, and that was to be part of the new beginning. Just as Noah was faithful in maintaining and caring for all those creatures on the ark as commanded by God, so too are we to be faithful in maintaining our world so that we may hand it over to those who come after us, and they in turn hand it to those who come after them.

We see evidence of the importance that the Coptic Orthodox Church places on matters of nature and the environment in the presence of dedicated prayers for them in every ritual service. The most visible example of this is in the litany that is prayed in every liturgy and ritual service:

'Raise the rivers to their measure according to Your grace. Give joy to the face of the earth; may its furrows be abundantly watered and its fruits be plentiful. Prepare it for sowing and harvesting and manage our life as You deem fit. Bless the crown of the year with your goodness for the sake of the poor of your people: the widow, the orphan, the traveller, the stranger, and for the sake of us all who entreat You and seek Your holy name. The eyes of every one look upon You for You give them their food in due season. Deal with us according to Your goodness, O You Who gives food to all creatures. Fill our hearts with joy and gladness that we, too, having sufficiency in every thing always, may abound in every good deed.

The environment is not something relegated to theological textbooks, but is a very real part of our life and our prayers, an essential part for which we thank God and ask His continued blessing. Our theology must be witnessed in our lives as pilgrims, especially in our places of pilgrimage. Those going on pilgrimage should set an example of caring for creation by dealing with the earth with the sanctity that it deserves and safeguarding its' resources. Our places of pilgrimage are beacons of our Faith, leading our pilgrims to become environmental stewards, caring for the whole of God's creation.

We believe, as Christians and stewards of God's creation, that we have a duty towards that which we have been given. We are called to be the vinedressers in the vineyard of our Lord, and be ready to give account for the harvest that has been entrusted to us (Matthew 21:33). To this means and purpose we dedicate ourselves not only as hired workers , for hired workers do not know what the master is doing, but rather as partners and fellow-workers with God in making this earth fruitful, that His whole creation, crowned by humankind, may have a more abundant life, and a joy that is full. (John 15:11-15 & 10:10)

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