

The Renaissance of Coptic Orthodox Church after long years of darkness [A Role Model for the Eritrean Orthodox Church]

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archdeacon Habib Guirgis



Introduction: Few would dispute that the Coptic Church, which was founded by St. Mark the evangelist, began its modern renaissance towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, after many centuries of darkness. A darkness which was forced upon her by two major historical events. The first of which were the woeful decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) which separated her from the rest of Christendom. The second was the Arab conquest of Egypt (641 A.D.), as a result of which the church's major preoccupation was sheer survival. Indeed the survival of the Copts till this day is a miracle and a witness for thirteen centuries of unwavering faith.

The renaissance of the church is due to three important developments:

The establishment of the Coptic Theological College.

The Coptic Sunday School movement.

The founding of Coptic Benevolent Societies

+ College graduates for the last one hundred years have been responsible for spreading Orthodox Christian education.

+ Sunday School which was a tiny seed planted and watered by men and women of faith, grew by the Almighty till it became a great tree giving fruit and shelter to countless many.

+ Coptic Benevolent Societies were responsible for the establishment of the great majority of newer churches, Coptic schools, hospitals, orphanages, and publishing houses, spreading education and social welfare to all Egyptians without discrimination.

Behind these three institutions lies a great army of selfless workers who were moved by faith and love for their church to arise and build with all the support and encouragement of the church leadership. Our church has recently celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the departure of one of the pioneers of Coptic renaissance, one who stands as a giant among his contemporaries, Archdeacon Habeeb Guirgis, a man of vision who inspired many generations of Copts.

Part Two: The most notable of the lay leaders of that age was Archdeacon Habeeb Guirgis, who was so outstanding not only because of his momentous deeds, but also because of the number of brilliant disciples he left behind, who followed his path and also wrote at length about his achievements since his death in 1951.

This giant man, who lived to the age of seventy-five, dedicated his whole life to the service of his church, even refusing marriage in order to channel time and many talents to its service. His vision was to see the resurrection of the glories of the church and he went about the task with unwavering love and enthusiasm. The main traits of his service were his perfection and comprehensiveness, and the combination of hard work with vision. In that he achieved the mark of greatness as stated by our Lord Jesus Christ, "...he who does (these commandments) and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of Heaven..."

Habeeb Guirgis was born in Cairo in 1876, his father hailed from the upper Egyptian town of Tema. He was only four years old when his father died, and his mother brought him up on Christian principles and nurtured his love of the church since his early childhood. If not for his upbringing, he would unlikely have had such burning love for his church and he would not have fought so hard to advance its cause.

He was educated in the "Great Coptic School" (Madraset elaqbat el-kubra) established by Pope Kirolos IV - father of the reform. He was ordained a deacon and remained at the side of Pope Kirolos V throughout his patriarchate. His photograph in deacon's vestments beside the Pope in his celebratory vestments is one which left a deep impression on me when I first saw it enlarged and framed on the walls of the headquarters of the Education Episcopal Office in Cairo.

With the end of the early stormy years of the Patriarchate of Pope Kirolos V, and especially after the bitter disputes launched by "El-Tawfik Coptic Association" members who were also members of the Coptic Community

Council, the Pope began the process of reform. The cornerstone of that process was the preparation of a newly educated and enlightened priesthood.

In July 1893, the Pope thought of establishing a theological college which would provide the opportunity of learning for those called to become servants of the altar. Naturally the establishment of such an institution required funds. For this the Pope chose his disciple, the bright young deacon, Habeeb Guirguis, who was seventeen years of age at the time, to tour the country in order to ask those who love their church to give what they can in order to establish the college.

Part Three: The young deacon travelled the land, visiting church after another, preaching and enthusing the people about building the theological college, proving to all the importance of such an institution. He returned at the end of the trip with the considerable sum of eleven thousand pounds, half of which was donated by the bishops and the other half by the congregations. With that effort, the Pope was able to buy a large house in an area called Mahmasha, near the suburb of Shoubra which became house for the fledgling college.

The Pope commissioned a fine learned man, Youssef Mankarius, to be its first principal. Habeeb Guirguis was the first of twelve applicants who sought to become its first graduates. Because of his exceptional aptitude, and also due to a lack of eligible teachers, Habeeb was also asked to teach and thus he was both a student and a teacher in the college at the same time.

On the 17th. of March 1898, upon graduating from the college, Habeeb was appointed Master of Scripture at the college. And because of the Pope's great admiration of his talents, he also appointed him as a lay preacher. His first sermon, entitled "The Christian Religion" was given in one of the halls of the "Great Coptic School". Amongst the listeners was Shenouda El Mankabadi, owner of "Misr" newspaper, who was so impressed by the young man's sermon that he printed thousands of copies at his own expense and distributed them to the people after seeking Habeeb's permission.

On another occasion, the young man was asked to give a sermon in the church of the Archangel Gabriel in Haret-el Sakkayeen in the presence of the Pope. The saintly Pope was so enthralled by the brilliance of his young deacon that he stood throughout the sermon, blessing the congregation as they listened, his face beaming with joy.

Part Four: That very year, Habeeb Guirguis started serving his church on two fronts, one as a teacher in the Theological College and the other as a traveling lay preacher. He was a truly gifted preacher, who possessed a strong voice, wide-ranging knowledge and, more importantly, a spirit that greatly affected his listeners. Fouad Basili (later Father Boulos Bassili), himself a gifted preacher, once said, "It appears to me that Habeeb Guirguis was preaching the very day he was born, for he is the archetypical preacher." It is essential to note at this juncture that Habeeb Guirguis' life was one living sermon as witnessed by all his contemporaries. He once stood to say words of congratulation to one of the Egyptian Nationalist leaders, Ahmed Pasha el-Menshawi, on his release from a prison sentence imposed by British colonial authorities. Pasha El-Menshawi was so taken by the young man's words and courtesy that he presented him with a 250 pound cheque as a gift to express his admiration. Habeeb immediately added the amount to a fund he was collecting to repair and extend the college building.

With his usual zeal, Habeeb proceeded to buy most available land and houses around the college until he managed to amalgamate an area of more than 5000 square meters. He once convinced an elderly neighbor to will 6 acres as a gift to the college and he proceeded to purchase 365 acres of land to add to the college estate outside the upper Egyptian town of el-Menia.

Due to his tireless efforts, the Pope ordained him Archdeacon and bought him a house for 550 pounds adjoining the college property and said to him, "I give you this house Habeeb in appreciation of your efforts and sacrifice." Habeeb accepted the gift with graceful appreciation. A few days later, he brought to his Pope the house's title registered in the Pope's name. His Holiness was ever more pleased with the grace that filled the heart of his spiritual son. It was no wonder that the Pope used to visit him regularly listening attentively to his suggestions and providing him with every assistance and organizing for payments to cover the needs of the service and his own livelihood.

Habeeb Guirguis returned this Christian bond of love with his Pope. He built a special Papal suite attached to the college. When the Pope visited that suite, he was so pleased that he said: "This is the new Patriarchate. I will make this a place of residence, and whoever wants to meet me, shall meet me here." Later he said, "This time I am here for a short visit, but next time I will stay a while." Indeed, the Pope went back and stayed in that suite

for a month and during his stay he

repeatedly said, "What a pity, this residence came so late in time, but it came in the fullness of time."

Habeeb Guirguis became the principal of the college in 1918, the year in which its previous principal, Youssef Mankarious departed this world. Pope Kirolos found no better than Habeeb Guirguis to take over. Habeeb, for 33 years, directed the collage with great capability. The following is a translation of the letter of appointment that the Pope wrote to his beloved son, which in itself is a display of the admiration the Pope had for him.

Part Five: "The honorable and blessed son, Archdeacon Habeeb Guirguis, Master of theological studies at the Coptic Theological College, may God's blessings be with you. After extending our prayers and blessings to you, we would like to inform you that due to the departure in the Lord of the principal of the Coptic Theological College, Youssef Bey Mankarious, and due to our certainty of your virtue, enthusiasm and ceaseless efforts for the betterment of the college, and also due to our total trust in your zeal and faithfulness to our beloved church, having served as a teacher in the above mentioned college for a long time, we appoint you principal of the College and request that you also remain in your role as teacher of theology.

We ask the Almighty to bless you, support you with His grace, fill you with His care and bring success to all your efforts. May the peace of God be with you, to Him be all thanksgiving forever more Amen."

Kirolos V Patriarch of the See of St. Mark 14th September 1918 Habeeb Guirguis turned the college into a new beacon of the orthodox faith and protected it from all foreign influences. In 1946, for instance, some members of the Coptic Community Council suggested that a scholarship be set up by the College for young Coptic theologians to study in an English theological college. Habeeb opposed this and the attempt failed when the then patriarch, Pope Youssab II opposed it.

On another occasion it was suggested by the Coptic Council that an Anglican priest be appointed as master of classical Greek in the college, alleging that no Copt had adequate knowledge of that language. Habeeb Guirguis met with his college masters and they published a unanimous resolution repudiating the council's suggestion in order to preserve the orthodoxy of teaching in the college. Eventually the wellknown Coptic master linguist Yassa Abdul Meseeh was appointed to teach that language. Habeeb Guirguis worked very hard to bring the Coptic public to realize the importance of preserving the orthodox faith and finding capable and enlightened priests to nurture it.

He met repeatedly with his associates in order to lay the foundation for the establishment of the college's "night school" for university graduates. The night school opened its doors during the Patriarchate of Yousab II, who was most pleased with this development and his joy was reflected by all the Bishops and members of the community council. The establishment of the night school was instrumental in gaining recognition for the college by the Egyptian Education Ministry as a college of Higher Education. That night school attracted many bright young graduates to join it, including a notable servant and Arts graduate called Nazeer Gayed who later became H.H. Pope Shenouda III.

Habeeb Guirguis regulated the college's study, improved its standard and brought it to a level comparable to theological colleges abroad. He searched long to provide it with many capable masters and expanded its curriculum to include varied philosophical and linguistic studies.

Part Six: Archdeacon Habeeb also worked to ensure that its graduates were accepted for priesthood if they wished. Pope Yoannes the 19th not only welcomed that suggestion, he went on to recommend in a cyclical letter to all the Bishops dated 10th of May 1930, the ordination of graduates of the college. He sent another similar recommendation on the 25th September 1931, and a third on the 17th April 1937. Later the Holy Synod met and decided that from the 17th of May 1937 only holders of the College's Diploma may be ordained as priests.

It became obvious to Habeeb Guirguis that the college must have its own church so that its students may attend prayers and liturgies and practice preaching. He bought a piece of land for that purpose and the first mass was celebrated in the new church by Pope Yoannes 19th on the 6th of March 1931.

In 1938 Habeeb Guirguis organized a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the graduation of the college's first student intake which was attended by many church dignitaries. He marked that occasion by publishing his important historical book, "The Theological College Past and Present."

After only a few years of preaching, Habeeb Guirguis realized that a foundation had to be firstly laid with the

children. The future generations of the church had to be taught from an early age so that Orthodox Christian values would permeate the depths of their personality and life. At this point we may catch a glimpse of one of the most monumental of Habeeb's achievements. On its own, this achievement would have been enough to ensure his place in history, though his purpose was not to take pride in achievements, but to carry the cross of his beloved Saviour and to serve the church in whatever way he could.

The achievement in question was the founding of the Coptic Sunday School. He planted a seed and watered it, and the Lord gave increases so that the small seed became a giant tree full of fruit. Habeeb Guirguis founded Sunday School in the year 1900, when he was 24 years of age. He started by teaching the children in some Cairo churches and Coptic School halls. The increase in the number of children encouraged him greatly, and he sought the help of others who shared his love for the church and zeal to protect its teachings. The Lord blessed this work so much that by 1908 Habeeb Guirguis organized a Central Committee to set the study curriculum and oversee the expanding work in that new fertile field, and also to ascertain the continued harmony of all who work in it.

The number of the branches multiplied and extended from the north of the country to the far south. And by 1941 the increase was such that a conference was held for Cairo's Sunday School servants and was attended by around 500 servants.

Sunday School was so popular, thanks to the efforts of its founder and his co-workers, that it became an important organ of the living church, and it remained throughout the years a living testimony for Christ and the teachings of His orthodox church in young hearts and minds.

Many activities sprang from the Sunday School such as the retreats to monasteries and churches, conferences, seminars, exhibitions as well as the publication of pamphlets and books.

Part Seven: His co-workers in the movement in turn shouldered the responsibility of continuing the march of the church out of the darkness to emerge back into the Christian world as a leading light, as it was in its golden age. Some of those servants, including the talented young poet and writer Nazeer Gayed, launched a very influential magazine in 1947 which was simply called "Sunday School." In their love for their great teacher, they placed the magazine under his care. The opening editorial written by Dr. Henry el-Khouli gives us a taste of the love and zeal which was transmitted from this great man to his young associates. It begins by saying:

"With a strong hand, the hand of the Almighty God, we publish this 'Sunday School Magazine'... our aim for its publication is not to simply increase the number of what is already published, but to embody our will for the rebirth of our Coptic Community. More than half a century has passed since the call for reformation was echoed by all, but some have not taken one step towards such reform. We have strengthened our resolve to knock on the doors of reform in order to receive a new life..."

By the grace of God, the magazine still publishes till this day after 45 years. Another of his co-workers suggested that a women's committee be established to cater for the activities of young female Sunday School servants, and to ensure that they maintain orthodox teaching. It was also suggested that all Sunday School branches must have the same format and program.

The central committee also observed that there were many young men and women who didn't have a chance to attend Sunday School when they were children, and thus they started "Al gameaa al keptea," preparing a program for them, encompassing spiritual, cultural and recreational services. God also blessed this service and it too became a large movement with numerous branches.

Part Eight: The era in which Habeeb Guirguis lived witnessed a struggle against powerful foreign forces that attempted to impose western culture, social attitudes and religion on the Egyptians. The latter half of the last century marked the arrival of western evangelistic missions who gradually increased in number and worked in tandem with the colonial powers, using sometimes the methods of the colonialists to spread their influence. To entice the locals into accepting their teachings, some missionaries did the mistake of offering the Copts many opportunities at the time offered only to foreign nationals. They assured them that joining a "modern church" would not be a denial of Christ but would be a window of opportunity for them and their children to enjoy the lifestyle of Europeans and Americans. In their efforts to "convert" the children of the national church, they used to enter Coptic homes and recount to the families the many benefits they are able to offer, then leave them a free Bible, attractive pictures and pamphlets. Their next step was to denigrate the mother church in front of the family, young and old. This resulted in the breaking up many Coptic families.

To counteract the effect of foreign evangelism, Pope Kirolos V embarked on a torturous pastoral tour in 1904. He

visited many places alongside the Nile Valley in order to meet his people and increase their bond of love to the church and its orthodox faith. He was accompanied with three metropolitans and his secretary together with two laymen, one of whom was Habeeb Guirguis who acted as the Pope's spokesman throughout the tour. The Papal tour paid particular attention to Assiut, which became the headquarter of the American mission.

Habeeb Guirguis also accompanied the same Pope on his second Papal tour five years later in order to maintain the effects of the first. It was during these tours that Habeeb might have observed the modern means by which the missionaries attracted a number of Coptic families. He thought that the church would probably benefit from borrowing some ideas from the evangelicals, such as afternoon spiritual gatherings for adults and Sunday Schools for children, and the use of hymns and individual prayers. Habeeb put his skills as a poet at work and wrote a book of hymns he called "Spiritual hymns and songs." Some of these hymns pointed to the glories of the Coptic church, like the famous "My Coptic Church, the church of God" (Kanisati-el-Keptia, kanisat-ulElah), which is well known till this day. In this way he successfully provided an alternative to the attractions of the services of the other churches.

In 1907 the Copts pleaded with the Ministry of Education to introduce Christian education to government schools. The minister finally agreed on the condition that the government would not incur any expense in providing teachers or curricula. The Pope chose his beloved Habeeb Guirguis for this important task, who dedicated all his efforts to prepare a book in three parts entitled "A Summary of the Origins of Faith." The book was first published in 1909 and was so successful that a fifth edition was published by 1913.

Part Nine: The next step was to extend Christian education from primary to secondary schools. By 1927 he had written eight new books, four for primary schools and four for secondary schools. The books were recommended later for publication by the Patriarch of the time, Pope Yoannes the 19th.

Habeeb Guirguis was equally successful a writer as an administrator and as a charismatic preacher. He wrote a total of 30 volumes in Arabic. Some of those books are still considered important references by students of theology. Some of these are "The Seven Sacraments of the Church," regarded for many years the most important reference on the subject. Also, "The Rock of Orthodoxy," a book on comparative theology explaining the differences between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant beliefs. Both were translated recently into English. He also published a magazine called El-Karma, "The Vine" which continued for 17 years to be a beacon of the orthodox faith.

The revival of the Coptic Church which was experienced this century, and which some of us witnessed, was undoubtedly due to three factors. We have already mentioned two, namely Sunday School and the Theological College. The third was the movement of establishing Coptic Associations.

During the last 100 years, hundreds of Coptic associations have been established to cater for specific community needs. Some were primarily spiritual, aiming to build churches and provide preachers for the churches. Some others established Coptic Schools in various towns and cities, still others built orphanages, libraries and houses for the aged. "Al-Iman Coptic Association" and "El-Tawfik Association" are the best examples. Habeeb Guirguis was a founding member of a number of such associations. He established "Al-Iman Central Committee," "Al-Mahabba Christian Education Society," and was the inspiration behind the establishment of various other societies dedicated to teaching the Word of God such as "The Society of the Friends of the Holy Bible," "Soldiers of the Church", "The Word of Salvation," "Society of Theological Graduates," and many others. These societies had succeeded within a short period of time to start new churches in the far suburbs of Cairo and nearby towns.

As he advanced in years and his health deteriorated, his house became full of his many faithful disciples. In a rare display of gratitude and love, they surrounded the bed to which he was confined, joining him in prayer and singing the hymns that he himself composed.

When his spirit was finally released on the 22nd of August 1951, the news was heralded to the far corners of Egypt and thousands attended his funeral; members of the clergy, men and women of the various societies, Sunday School servants and the people at large, all came to express their gratitude towards the man who dedicated all his days to the service of the church.

Part Ten: In a memorial service held in his honour on the 28th of September 1951, many of his disciples stood up to express their deep feelings and respect for this great man. None was more moving than that of Dr. Wahib Attalla (Bishop Gregorius).

"... How shall I begin and what shall I say, we are used to never praising a living person, but today the time has

come for us to talk. There is a time for silence and a time to speak out... what shall we then say... I cannot preach in the spiritual presence of this great preacher, I loathe even repeating the words he has taught us lest those words lose their strength when I utter them, for they came out so strongly when he spoke them. You had a heart so open with love for all, friend and foe alike. You have borne all things and served all people. You were wonderful, master, in your capacity for love and forgiveness. Your solid faith in God kept despair out of your heart despite the numerous obstacles that stood in your way. You possessed a great mind, one that grasped the matters of the world and the spirit... You struggled all your life to maintain your purity both in heart and thought, banishing any love of money or fame..."

In the same event the relatively young poet Nazeer Gayed (H.H. Pope Shenouda III) stood to eulogize his beloved teacher with a most beautiful poem...

Such was your piety

Your faith and your love

Here is your world

All thorns and crucifixion

But who are you?

Are you a messenger?

For you are brighter than a messenger

You are the throbbing heart

The heart embracing a whole nation

A deep spring of compassion and charitable elation

O great saint!

What a strength without violence

Meekness without weakness

Nobility of temperament

Ever ready to forgive offenses

A father on whose chest we all crawled.

Thus departed a man of many talents; a writer, a poet, a preacher, a teacher and an administrator, all in one.

Departed a man who held many positions in the Church; a member of the Coptic Community Council, a professor of theology, Principal of the Theological College, Vice-president of the Sunday School Central Committee, publisher of the "El Karma" and active member of a multitude of charitable societies.

One who was a most notable Archdeacon of the church since St. Stephen the Martyr. One who still inspires all theology students, Sunday School servants and generations of Christians to come. One who is and will remain an honour to all laity servants. Habeeb Guirgis, now a member of the church triumphant.

May his memory inspire many more generations to come.

From the book: - "archdeacon Habib Guirgis" by Michael Gibrael and translation by Shaheer Gobran. [[Book](#)]