

## A CHURCH FOR THE COPTS OF NEWFOUNDLAND

Newfoundland is the easternmost province of Canada. It is a province with rugged terrain and harsh weather, with a small population that consists almost entirely of fishermen. Until recently, it was the poorest province, with unemployment approaching 25%.

It is not surprising that few people would want to live there, especially among Copts, who are usually content to concentrate in urban areas rather than tackle the frontiers.

Yet, some did, out of necessity, and here is the reason; Because of the undesirability of the province, a chronic shortage of medical practitioners has forced the authorities to relax the rules for foreign medical graduates, and some Coptic doctors took advantage of this.

Starting in the late nineteen eighties, a trickle of Coptic doctors sought positions in Newfoundland. One of the earliest, was Dr. Samir Yassa, a Urologist, who moved there in 1989 together with his wife and 3 children.

It was in the summer of 1991 that Dr. Yassa phoned me, to tell me that he had identified 6 Coptic families in Newfoundland, and to ask me if I would go to hold a Eucharist for them. I decided to go there on a trial basis.

I went on a Friday evening, where I met the 6 families in Dr. Yassa's house in the town of Grand Falls. It was there that I realized the needs of the Copts for service by any priest who could take the time and the effort. One of the families had to drive for 7 hours to attend the Liturgy. They told me that they had not confessed or taken communion for 3 years. Another family had a two year old baby, who did not have communion since she was baptized (neither did the rest of the family.)

We had a long confession session on Friday and the next morning we held the Liturgy in the house of Dr. Yassa.

A few months later, we discovered more Coptic families in St. John's, the capital of the province. I started to visit those families on an occasional basis, as well as those in Grand Falls. During that time, we realized that the number of Copts in Newfoundland was more than we expected, with more doctors working in remote areas of the province.

We then started to encourage Coptic doctors in the more inhabitable parts of Canada to seek employment in Newfoundland. The fact that other Copts had survived there for years, coupled with the knowledge that a Liturgy is held there once in a while encouraged many to take the plunge!

As the numbers grew, we decided to rent a church instead of using the houses for the service. A small chapel in a Catholic church in St. John's was available and we started using it. The service became regular, once a month on a Saturday.

By 1996, the number of families reached 25, I then proposed to them to register a church, so that they can start collecting donations from among themselves to cover the travelling expenses and the church rental, and later on to save for purchasing a permanent church.

When I was asked to suggest a name for the new church, I suggested Saint Maurice, an almost forgotten Coptic martyr from the third century, who is well known all over the world, except in his native land, Egypt. With about a thousand churches and altars dedicated to him worldwide, and yet non in the Coptic Church.

Saint Maurice and his companions of the Theban Legion left their homeland (Egypt) and sojourned in Europe to pursue their careers as soldiers. They all died there as Martyrs (read their story in this issue.) I personally feel a lot of affinity towards these “Immigrant Martyrs!” The idea of buying a church was controversial. Many people felt that Newfoundland is a place where people go for a few years until they find a better place. This is true, for many doctors have since left to other parts of Canada, Yet many of them told me, if we had a permanent church, we would have stayed. The other argument for buying a church is the fact that for every family that leaves another or more come, evidenced by the fact that the numbers are on the increase.

Recently, oil was discovered in the province and an economical boom is now creating more job opportunities than ever.

In May, 2000, His Grace Bishop Reweiss visited St. John’s and celebrated the Eucharist with many of the Copts of Newfoundland. His Grace was totally convinced of the need for a permanent church and a permanent priest for that province. With service on the Sundays in the capital St. John’s, and services on Saturdays in the other parts of the province, including such remote parts where families are isolated and remain for months or even years without service.

After several attempts to purchase a church, we finally found a small building, that was built 2 years ago as a computer training school. It seemed perfect for our purpose, with two halls, one would serve as a church and the other as a hall, a small kitchen and bathrooms and adequate parking. The price agreed on was \$176 000, less than the price of an average house in Canada. We will– God willing– take possession on January 15, 2001. This will give us time to raise the funds needed. Currently, they have \$60 000, and we are confident that we will raise the rest of the funds needed.

I urge all our readers to take the blessing of this new church, and to share in honouring the memory of St. Maurice and his companions. A specially marked envelop is included for this purpose. Receipts will be issued to all donors, that are accepted for tax deduction both in Canada and U.S.A.

We have included the story of St. Maurice and the Theban Legion, as well as a print of the icon of St. Maurice.

A condition for the purchase was that the City of St. John’s would allow a change of occupancy to allow use of the building as a church. The city gave its approval in a letter that we received on October 5<sup>th</sup>, the feast day of St. Maurice according to the Coptic Calendar.

*Father Athanasius Iskander*

## **SAINT MAURICE AND THE THEBAN LEGION**

A traveler, on the highway that leads from Geneva to Rome, will notice a small and very old Swiss town called Saint Maurice. This town was known in Roman times as Aguanum, an important communication centre. It was there that a Coptic officer named Maurice

and his fellow soldiers died for the sake of Christ at the hands of the impious Emperor Maximian (285–305 AD).

The story of these martyrs, commonly known as the Theban Legion, has been preserved for us by Saint Eucher, bishop of Lyons, who died in 494 A.D. The bishop starts the account of the martyrdom of these valiant soldiers by the following introduction:

“Here is the story of the passion of the Holy Martyrs who have made Aguanum illustrious with their blood. It is in honour of this heroic martyrdom that we narrate with our pen the order of events as it has come to our ears. We often hear, do we not, how a particular locality or city is held in high honour because of one single martyr who died there, and quite rightly, because in each case the saint gave his precious soul to the most high God. How much more should this sacred place, Aguanum, be revered, where so many thousands of martyrs have been slain with the sword for the sake of Christ.”

Under Maximian, who was an Emperor of the Roman Commonwealth, with Diocletian as his colleague, an uprising of the Gauls known as "Bagaudae" forced Maximian to march against them with an army of which one unit was the Theban Legion. This unit of 6600 men had been recruited from Upper Egypt and consisted entirely of Christians. They were good men and excellent soldiers who, even under arms, did not forget to render to God the things of God, and to Caesar the things of Caesar.

After the revolt was quelled, the Emperor Maximian issued an order that the whole army should join in offering sacrifices to the gods for the success of their mission. The order included killing Christians (probably as a sacrifice to the Roman gods.) Only the Theban Legion dared to refuse to comply with these orders. The legion withdrew itself, encamped near Aguanum and refused to take part in these rites.

Maximian was then resting in a nearby place called Octudurum. When the news came to him, he repeatedly commanded them to obey his orders, and upon their constant and unanimous refusals, sentenced them to be decimated. Accordingly, every tenth man was put to death. A second decimation was ordered unless the men obeyed the order given, but there was a great shout through the camp: they all declared that they would never allow themselves to carry out such a sacrilegious order. They had always had a horror of idolatry, they had been brought up as Christians and were instructed in the One Eternal God and were ready to suffer extreme penalties rather than do anything contrary to their religion.

When Maximian heard this, he became even angrier than before. Like a savage beast, he ordered the second decimation to be carried out, hoping that the remainder should be compelled to do what they had hitherto refused. Yet, they still maintained their resolve. After the second decimation, Maximian warned the remainder that it was of no use for them to trust in their number, for if they persisted in their disobedience, not a man among them would escape death.

The greatest mainstay of their faith in this crisis was undoubtedly their captain Maurice, with his lieutenants Candid, the first commanding officer, and Exuperius the "*campidoctor*." He fired the hearts of the soldiers with fervor by his encouragement. Maurice, calling attention to the example of their faithful fellow soldiers, already martyred, persuaded them all to be ready to die in their turn

for the sake of their baptismal vow (the promise one makes at his baptism to renounce Satan and his abominable service and to worship only God.) He reminded them of their comrades who had gone to heaven before them. Due to his words, a glorious eagerness for martyrdom burned in the hearts of those most blessed men.

Fired thus by the lead of their officers, the Thebans sent to Maximian who was still enraged, a reply as loyal as it was brave:

“Emperor, we are your soldiers, but also, the soldiers of the True God. We owe you military service and obedience, however, we cannot renounce Him who is our Creator and Master, and also yours, even though you reject Him. In all things which are not against His law, we most willingly obey you, as we have done hitherto. We readily oppose your enemies whoever they are, but we cannot stain our hands with the



blood of innocent people (Christians). We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you, you cannot place any confidence in our second oath if we violate the first. You commanded us to execute Christians, behold we are such. We confess God the Father, Creator of all things and His Son Jesus Christ, our God. We have seen our comrades slain with the sword, we do not weep for them but rather rejoice at their honour. Neither this, nor any other provocation has tempted us to revolt. Behold, we have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin.”

When Maximian heard this, he realized that these men were obstinately determined to remain in their Christian faith, and he despaired of being able to turn them from their constancy. He therefore decreed, in a final sentence, that they should be rounded up, and the slaughter completed.

The troops sent to execute this order came to the blessed legion and drew their swords upon those holy men who, for love of Life, did not refuse to die. They were all slain with the sword. They never resisted in any way. Putting aside their weapons, they offered their necks to the executioners. Neither their numbers nor the strength of arms tempted them to uphold the justice of their cause by force. They kept just one thing in their minds, that they were bearing witness to Him who was led to death without protest, and, Who, like a lamb, opened not his mouth; and that now, they themselves, sheep of the Lord's flock, were to be massacred as if by ravaging wolves. Thus, by the savage cruelty of this tyrant, that fellowship of the saints was perfected. For they despised things present in hope of things to come. So was slain that truly angelic legion of men who, we trust, now praise the Lord God of Hosts, together with the legions of Angels, in heaven forever.

Not all of the members of the legion were at Aganum at the time of the massacre. Others were posted along a military highway linking Switzerland with Germany and Italy. These were progressively and methodically martyred wherever they were found.

Some of the most celebrated saints who were martyred in Switzerland include the following names: Maurice, Exuperius, Candid, Innocent and Vitalis with the rest of their cohort, were martyred at Aganum (Saint Maurice en Valais). Saints Ursus, Victor and 66 companions were found at Solothurn, Saints Felix, Regula and Exuperantius at Zurich, and Saint Verena of Zurzach.

In Italy, Saint Alexander was killed at Bergamo, the three Saints Octavius, Adventor and Solutor at Turin, Saint Antonius of Piacenza, Saints Constantius, Alverius, Sebastianus and Magius from the Cottian Alps, Saints Maurelius, Georgius and Tiberius in Pinerolo, Saints Maximius, Cassius, Secundus, Severinus and Licinius in Milan, and Saint Secundus of Ventimilia, together with a host of names of lesser saints.

In Germany, we have Saints Tyrsus, Palmatus, Bonifatius and their comrades in Terier, Saints Cassius, Florentius and their cohort in Bonn, Saint Gereon and 318 others at Cologne and Saints Victor, Mallosius with 330 companions at Xanten.

During their martyrdom, numerous miracles happened, which undoubtedly largely contributed to the massive conversion of the inhabitants of these regions to Christianity. In Zurich for instance, the three beheaded Saints, Felix, Regula and Exuperantius miraculously rose, carried their heads on their own hands, walked to the top of a hill, where they knelt, prayed and at last lay down.

On the same spot, a large cathedral was later erected. The three saints carrying their heads on their hands appear on the coat of arms and seal of Zurich until today.

Saints Victor, Orsus and their comrades were barbarously tortured by Hirtacus, the Roman governor of Solothurn. During this torture several miracles occurred, e.g. the shackles suddenly broke open, the fire was instantaneously extinguished, etc. The lookers-on were thus filled with wonder and began to admire and venerate the Theban legionaires, upon which the furious Hirtacus ordered their immediate beheading. Without the slightest resistance they offered the executors their necks. The bodies of the beheaded saints then shone in glaring brightness. The bodies of the saints which were thrown in the river Aar, advanced to the bank, stepped out, walked heads on hands, then knelt and prayed at the spot where the Basilica of St. Peter later arose.

The bodies of the martyrs of Aganum were discovered and identified by Saint Theodore the Bishop of Octudurm, who was in office at 350 A.D. He built a Basilica in their honour at Aganum, the remains of which are visible even now. This later became the centre of a monastery built about the year 515 AD on land donated by King Sigismund of Burgundy.

Saint Eucher (died 494 A.D.) mentions that in his time, many came from diverse provinces of the empire devoutly to honour these saints, and to offer presents of gold, silver and other things. He mentions that many miracles were performed at their shrine such as casting out of devils and other kinds of healings "which the might of the Lord works there every day through the intercession of His saints."

In the middle ages Saint Maurice was the patron saint of several of the ruling dynasties in Europe, and later on, of the Holy Roman Emperors. In 926, Henry I (919–936) even ceded the present Swiss Canton (province) of Aargau in return for the lance of the Saint. Some emperors were also anointed before the Altar of Saint Maurice in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. The Sword of Saint Maurice, was last used in the coronation of the Austrian Emperor Charles as King of Hungary in 1916.

Kings, noblemen and church leaders vied to obtain even small portions of the relics of the saints in order to build churches in their honour. King Louis of France offered the monastery one of the treasured thorns that came from the crown of thorns of our Saviour in return for a small portion of the sacred relics. He later built a church in honour of the martyrs inside the court of his palace.

Saint Maurice has always been one of the most popular saints in Western Europe, with more than 650 foundations in his name in France alone. Five cathedrals, innumerable churches, chapels and altars are consecrated in his name all over Europe. In the monastery that bears his name at Saint Maurice en Valais, the monks perform a special devotion to the Saints every day, and celebrate their feast on September 22 of each year. An all-night vigil, on the night before the feast is attended by nearly 1000 people. On the feast day (which is a province holiday,) Swiss guards in their beautiful traditional attire, carry the relics of the martyrs in ancient silver caskets, in a procession around the town, preceded by the Mayor, the city officials and the monks and priests in the Monastery of St. Maurice. Over seventy towns all over the world bear the name of Saint Maurice, including one in Canada.

In 1991, the same year service started in Newfoundland, the Christian world celebrated the seventeenth centennial of the martyrdom of these saints. H.H. Pope Shenouda delegated His Grace Bishop Serapion to represent the Coptic Church in these

celebrations. On that occasion, parts of the relics of Saint Maurice, St. Cassius and St. Florentius were returned to the Coptic Church. They are now in a small chapel in the Patriarchate in Anba Reweiss complex.

## **REFERENCES:**

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- L'Abbaye Saint Maurice en Valais: A place called Saint Maurice.
- Thurston & Attwater: Butler's Lives of the Saints.

## **DOXOLOGY OF THE THEBAN MARTYRS**

The holy and valiant martyrs  
Of the Theban Legion,  
Who gave their lives for the Faith  
And converted the pagans.

Egypt was their homeland  
But Europe became their burial ground.

Six thousand and six hundred soldiers—  
The best in the Roman army.

They fought with courage and honour,  
Defeating the impious foes,  
But idols they would not worship,  
Even under threat of death.

They threw their arms to the ground  
And gave their necks unto the sword,  
Preferring death as Christians  
To life in shame as infidels.

Their testimony to their Lord  
Was greeted by many miracles,  
And thousands of those who stood by  
Believed on the Name of Jesus Christ.

Blessed are you, Saints Maurice,  
Exuperius and Candid;  
Victor, Ursus and Alexander,  
The beloved of Christ.

Pray to the Lord on our behalf,  
O victorious martyrs,  
Saint Maurice and his companions,  
That He may forgive us our sins.