

A POPE FOR OUR TIMES

By: Father Athanasius Iskander

Your Holiness Pope Shenouda III, my fathers the Bishops, my fathers the priests, ladies and gentlemen:

In the life of each one of us, there are moments or events that stand out in memory, unchanged by the passage of time or the advance of years. I would like to share with you one of those indelible memories that I have. It goes back half a century ago, I was 10 years old at the time. In the district of Shobra, in the city of Cairo, where I was born and raised, one of the churches, perhaps the Church of Archangel Michael, hosted a debate. The debate was about whether women should go out to work, or should stay home and raise kids. Yes, in those days we could actually debate such things, since political correctness had not yet been invented.

I went to watch the debate with my parents, and from the beginning, it became clear that it was a one sided debate, dominated by the advocate of women staying home. He would listen to his opponent carefully, and then, methodically and vigorously dismantle every argument he advances.

At the end of two hours, we were asked to cast votes to show who won the debate. The result was completely lopsided; the young man advocating women staying home had not only won the day, he had won the minds and the hearts of all that attended.

That young man ladies and gentlemen was Nazir Gayed, who was destined to become the Pope with the greatest charisma and oratorical skills in modern times.

Since its beginning, our church had been a missionary church. From Alexandria, the Gospel was preached to Lybia and Pentapolis since ancient times, a fact that was recognized by the Fathers assembled at Nicea, who decreed, "Let the ancient custom prevail that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction over all the land of Egypt, Lybia and Pentapolis."

As early as the time of St. Demetrius, the 12th Pope of Alexandria, our church carried the banner of Christianity to far away lands. For Eusebius of Caesaria tells us that St. Demetrius sent Pantaenus, the dean of the school of Alexandria to preach in India. Pantaenus found out that the Gospel had been preached there by Saint Thomas the Apostle, and returning home with the good tidings, he visited Yemen where he proclaimed the Gospel There.

Missionary activity reached its peak in the time of Pope Athanasius, the 20th Pope of Alexandria, when Ethiopia and Nubia were evangelized. By that time also, Europe had its first evangelization by Coptic monks and missionaries. The martyrdom of the Theban legion around the year 300, was the greatest catalyst to the conversion of Switzerland, Northern Italy and Southern Germany.

In Ireland, 7 Coptic monks preached Christianity long before St. Patrick set foot on Irish soil. In Britain we also learn that from an early date, Coptic missionaries spread the Good news among the pagan tribes there. One place in particular is mentioned by historians as the centre of Coptic missionary enterprise. That place is called Glastonbury. It used to be a great centre for Idol worship, which our Coptic missionaries turned into a great centre for Christian enlightenment.

One can read about these things and say, alas, those were the days of the greatness of the church. But let me tell you ladies and gentlemen, have you looked at the map of the world lately? There is hardly a place where you cannot find a church, a monastery, a seminary or a mission that was inaugurated by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

We have missionary work all over Africa, in the Carribean, and as we recently read in Al Keraza, in China. We even have a Coptic Missionary in Northern India, Father Silas Hosein, who prides himself in the fact that he is maintaining a Coptic presence in the Himalayas.

We have missionary work in Europe, in the form of the British and the French Orthodox churches. And Providence had so willed that Glastonbury which, 17 centuries ago, was the centre of Coptic missionary enterprise in Britain, should regain its days of glory, when Pope Shenouda III appointed His Eminence Metropolitan Seraphim as Metropolitan of Glastonbury.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the glories of the past have been renewed for us by the efforts of this missionary Pope of ours, who travels the whole world to spread the word of God. Never since the time of St.

Athanasius the great, had our church been as well respected, or as well known or as well spread all over the world as during the papacy of his Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

One day little children came to see the Lord Jesus, but the disciples drove them away. The Lord Jesus was not pleased with this. He told them, "Suffer the little children to come to me and hinder them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Like his master, our Pope is a great advocate for the young. He speaks to them in the language they understand, he listens to their concerns in their own tongue, he feels their needs and their dilemmas and his heart goes out to them.

I remember a night early in May 1981. I had just finished the 40 days of seclusion in the Monastery of Anba Bishoy, which followed my ordination. On the night before leaving the Monastery, I sat with His Holiness, asking him to give me his advice for the enormous task that lay ahead of me. His Holiness told me, "Look after the young ones, for if we lose them, we lose everything." H. H. spoke to me at length about how to cater to the needs of the young generation. He even gave me a list of books in English that would be beneficial for them to read. His Holiness' advice became the creed for my ministry over the past 17 years. And, should any of you wonder, why is it that my ministry is youth centred, it is because of what I had learned from H. H. Pope Shenouda, the Pope of the youth.

In the annals of our church there are 117 great Popes, but among those great Popes, some stand out in a particular way. They are the greatest among the great. A keen student of our church's history will not fail to notice that each one of those greatest among the great had made a sojourn away from his Papal cathedral, in the face of the tyranny of the temporal ruler of the day. Dionysius the great 14th Pope of Alexandria, described as "A burning and a shining light to the Church, whose great influence extended throughout the East and the West," sojourned during the 8th persecution under Decius. Athanasius the Apostolic, 20th Pope of Alexandria sojourned for 5 times, during the successive reign of 16 Roman Emperors, all of whom he outlived. Dioscorus, the 25th Pope of Alexandria sojourned for the last few years of his life on the island of Gangra on the Black sea. And Theodosius the great, the 33rd Pope of Alexandria, described as "the strongest voice for non Chalcedonian Christianity after Severus of Antioch," spent the major part of his papacy in Constantinople, as a "guest" of the Emperor Justinian.

In the footsteps of these great Popes, and I dare to say, in the footsteps of the Master, Who, faced with the tyranny of King Herod, sojourned in the land of Egypt, our beloved Pope made his sojourn into the wilderness of Shiheat in 1981. In taking that sojourn into the wilderness H.H. was not only keeping a venerable tradition established by the great Popes who preceded him, but he was also paying the dues of greatness.

Satan saw in each one of those great Popes a threat to his earthly kingdom, so he struck against them. H. H. was no exception, for Satan looked upon the Church under his leadership, and what did he see? He saw a giant that had been asleep for 15 centuries suddenly awakening. Satan didn't like what he saw, so, he used his old trick, "Strike the shepherd and the flock shall be scattered." But it didn't work, for when H.H. made his sojourn into the wilderness the souls and the hearts and the minds of the flock made that same sojourn into the wilderness together with the shepherd.

Satan thought that he could silence the greatest preacher among the Popes of modern times, but, as St. Paul tells us, "The word of God cannot be bound." And little did Satan know, that the sojourn of H.H. into the wilderness of Shiheat, would bequeath unto the whole of Christendom some of the greatest classics of spirituality that H. H. had ever written.

But the flight of H.H. into Shiheat, to me, has another more profound dimension. For I believe that in it, we have a prophetic sign that pre-figures the sojourn of the Church at the end of times. The Book of Revelation chapter 12, tells us of a woman clothed with the Sun and the moon under her feet, with a crown of 12 stars on her head. It also tells us of a great red dragon that persecutes the woman, who is given the two wings of a great eagle to fly into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she shall be fed, protected and defended by God against the Dragon. Many of the Fathers of the Church teach that this

pertains to the time of the Great Tribulation, when Antichrist shall persecute the Church, and when God will allow the Church to sojourn in the wilderness in order to be saved from the tyranny of Antichrist.

I see many similarities between this and the sojourn of His Holiness into the wilderness. For one thing, the Church's sojourn is said to be into the wilderness, and so was H.H. sojourn. Another aspect is the duration of the Great Tribulation, during which the Church shall sojourn. It is given to us by the Book of Revelation as three and a half years or 42 months. H. H. sojourn lasted three and a half years less two months. And that agrees very well with what the Lord had promised us, that even if the time allowed for Antichrist to practice his tyranny is three and a half years, yet for the sake of the elect, that time shall be shortened. It was shortened by 2 months in the mini tribulation of 1981. By how much will the great Tribulation of the end of times be shortened? Only God the Father knows.

The Book of Revelation assures us of the final victory of the Church, for even though we are told that the enemy will have power to make war against the saints and to overcome them, yet we are assured that they will "overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." This promise has also been fulfilled, for if we compare the Coptic Church under the leadership of Pope Shenouda today, to the same Church before the sojourn, we will see a more vigorous, a more vibrant and a much stronger Church, a church, that to the Devil, is "terrible like an army with banners."

Again the Bible tells us that the Lord will avenge His Church from the tyrant. For Saint Paul tells us in 2nd Thessalonians Chapter 2, concerning Antichrist, "that the Lord shall consume him with the breath of His mouth and destroy him with the brightness of His coming." The parallelism cannot escape anyone, for we have all seen and heard how the Lord had avenged His Church and His anointed one swiftly and decisively.

No one can tell if the Great Tribulation will or will not happen in our days, but should it happen in our days, we can always look back upon the Tribulation of 1981, and draw strength, courage, comfort and assurance. Strength and courage from our knowledge that the Lord will shorten those days for our sake, comfort in the knowledge that the Church shall in the end overcome, and assurance of God's just retribution against the enemies of His Church.

Finally ladies and gentlemen, these are amazing times that we are living in. And no one can ignore the revolution in science and technology that we are witnessing, especially in the area of communications. And we ought to give thanks to God almighty, for he has given us a Pope for our times. A Pope that believes that science and technology can be harnessed and used in the service of the word of God. A Pope that admonished all of the priests of North America to be on the Internet. To use it to reach out to Copts who live away from the main population centres. A Pope that maintains a Web site that can humble anyone of us who are living in the land of science and technology. If you haven't visited H.H. Web site please do, it is at www.copticpope.org, it is so sophisticated that it will dazzle you. Or in the lingo of the young generation, It's a cool web site.

So, without any further ado, ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great honour to present to you, the Pope destined by God to lead our church into the 21st century, H.H. Pope Shenouda III.