



The Coptic Orthodox Church is of the oldest known Churches in Christianity. Its Biblical worship, its 2000 years of Christianity, and unbroken chain of tradition directly link its faithful to the early church of the Book of Acts in the New Testament. The Coptic Orthodox Church has millions of adherents both in Egypt and Coptic communities around the world.

The definition of Orthodoxy can be found within the roots of its name. One of the roots of the name "Orthodoxy" is taken from the Greek word which means "opinion, teaching". It can also mean "glory". Therefore, Orthodoxy means the "proper method of rendering glory, right worship, and consequently the right way of teaching about the One to whom the glory is rendered."

The history of the Orthodox Christianity can be traced to the era of the original twelve Apostles. Coptic Orthodox Christianity is indeed the "original" church. It has survived intact from the very first century. The Coptic Church has carefully and honorably maintained its earliest traditions. It has been well documented by those who have studied the

strongly traditionalist, Coptic Orthodox religion, that influence from outside cultures has been minimal.

The Coptic Church has faced discriminations and hardships of all kinds, including active persecutions. Yet, the Church has thrived and the traditions have survived in these often-unfriendly environments. The vast and innumerable martyrs are a testimony to the Coptic Orthodox followers' unshakable faith.

Perhaps, before we speak of martyrdom, we should look at the outstanding contributions of the Church that were occurring alongside the brutal persecutions taking place. In this way, one can better comprehend the atmosphere of the day, the religious climate, and that persecutions were not an end to the Coptic Orthodox faith but impetus for its continuation.

Christianity arrived very early in Egypt. St Mark, author of the oldest canonical Gospel, utilized by both St. Matthew and St. Luke and probably also by St. John, brought Christianity to Egypt. He preached the Gospel and founded the See of St. Mark in Alexandria, Egypt. He became the first Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the first of 117 unbroken chains of Patriarchs. It should be noted with this founder, that the church had an extremely strong foundation from its beginnings. On Holy

Resurrection Sunday, May 8 AD 68 St. Mark received his crown of martyrdom with a rope around his neck utilized to drag him through the streets in Alexandria until death.

How can a Christian tradition thrive in an environment of foreign domination, religious persecution, and political derision? The answer to this lies in the many movements occurring previous to and during all this unrest. Let's examine what was occurring prior to and during the history of the courageous persecutions.

The origin of Christian monasticism, both of the hermit type and the community type, had its conception and birth in Egypt. St. Anthony of the Desert founded the hermit type as we know it today and St. Pachomius instituted the community monastic way of life. With Christian monasticism having its earliest beginnings in Egypt, a dramatic new way of life is unfolding and a positive theology of spiritual life and growth is developing. This makes for a very spiritually enlightening atmosphere.

Along with the monastic movement, the Christian School of Alexandria places Christianity for the first time at the highest intellectual and spiritual levels of the Hellenistic World. Bishops of Alexandria from the earliest beginnings created a strong hierarchical

government for the Church of Alexandria. Egypt had many illustrious early church fathers such as St. Athanasius and St. Cyril.

While the apostolic foundation of the Coptic Church and its strong leadership is glorious it is also tragic. Tragic, because of the vast numbers of its followers who suffered martyrdom in various persecutions for their adherence to the Christian faith.

Let's look at the origin for the term, "martyr".

The risen Lord Jesus Christ said, "*You shall be MY WITNESSES in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

As He sent out His disciples throughout the world, they were to be HIS WITNESSES. Thus the Greek word for WITNESS is "MARTYR". We may be witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ by the way in which we live our lives, by setting a good example for others to follow, and showing others the love that we have for the Lord. But we may be called upon to follow our Lord Jesus Christ to the end of the way of the Cross. We may be asked willingly to give our lives rather than abandon our loyalty to Him.

The early Church thought of this death as the complete and final act of witnessing. Thus the term "martyr" has become to mean one who witnesses for

the Lord Jesus Christ by dying for His Holy Name. The Coptic Church has innumerable martyrs and saints. It is historically famous for its long-suffering and courageous capabilities to sustain persecutions and hardships. In honor of these Christians who gave their life so that others might find theirs, let's discuss the Holy Spirit and His work in the life of the martyr.

The Coptic Orthodox faithful believe that all miracles, supernatural gifts, all wonders, and powers are due to the Holy Spirit's work within man. It is not due to a special human power. The Holy Spirit teaches, guides, and edifies. It reminds us that He gives all.

St. Paul, the Apostle, asked the believers to pray always with all prayer and supplication, *"for all the saints and for me, that utterance may be given to me that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the Gospel"* (Ephesians 6:18-19).

St Paul also asserted that, *"the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the profit of all"* (I Corinthians 12:7) and *"that the church may receive edification"* (I Corinthians 14:4) and also, *"for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the*

unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God" (Ephesians 4:12).

Therefore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not for boasting, for earthly honor, nor for vainglory, but for edifying the church.

The martyrs were strong and non-compromising in their Christian beliefs and never denied the Lord their God. They had absolutely no fear of death, and their difficulties, sufferings, trials, and imprisonments neither troubled them nor deflected them from their purpose. The important thing was that they WITNESSED for the Lord Jesus Christ.

They let whatever was to happen, happen. Death was the only means in which to silence their proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ as the risen Savior. The cost they paid was not the end to their earthly life but the beginning of an eternal one. They bore and harvested the Fruit of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit leads this Fruit of the Spirit. St Paul the Apostle said, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, joy, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). We know the martyrs experienced all these fruits of righteousness even until their death. Death in the Lord Jesus Christ's name meant the ultimate attainment of these Fruits of the Spirit. It would

mean Eternal Glory for those who allowed the Holy Spirit to work in them. Therefore the martyrs had the assurance of an unending Joy.

Even faith itself, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Psychologically, a normal person without the comfort of the Holy Spirit would be fearful of facing certain death. Without the Holy Spirit one would view death as the end of life. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said, "*All things are possible to him who believes*" (Mark 9:23). The MARTYRS BELIEVED.

I Corinthians 12:3 states, "*no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*" The martyrs were able to accept faith due to the work of the Holy Spirit. They allowed the Holy Spirit to fulfill their lives. They were consumed with the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When God's Spirit dwells in someone, He sanctifies him or her. He sanctified the martyrs. The whole of the martyr was sanctified; his heart, his mind, his body, his spirit and his soul. He sanctified their life in general. "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless...*" (I Thessalonians 5:23). God dwelt in the martyrs. He sanctified their life and yielded the Fruit of the Spirit in it.

The martyrs sole aim was the Lord Jesus Christ and their life with Him in blissful Eternity. Simply, that is why they followed Him wholeheartedly even to their death. Unheeding temptations and tortures of which none could alter their heart which abided in the Lord. St. Paul the Apostle said, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:35-39).

The martyrs left us with many lessons and examples that impact upon our lives today. Most probably the most valuable is discernment between Fruit of the Spirit and gifts. Fruit of the Spirit has to do with life and eternity. Gifts are mostly for the benefit of others and can possibly lead to pride and vainglory. Gifts are referring here to wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation (I Corinthians 12:8-11). The martyrs were primarily concerned with Fruits of the Spirit rather than gifts.

The martyr's Fruit of the Spirit made him all-powerful in everything. "*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you*

shall be WITNESS TO ME..." (Acts 1:8). This was the promise of the Lord to His Holy Disciples. Attesting to this, a powerful person, such as a martyr, overcomes fear of losing his life, his ministry is powerful, and they have a strong influence on others. Fruits of the Spirit will distinguish him in every good deed.

The power and strength of the martyrs was found within the work shared with the Holy Spirit. They felt the power of God within them. They were spiritually strong and without weakness. They had communion with God's Spirit.

The martyrs became a temple of God and the Holy Spirit dwelt in them. Psalm 93:5 sums up the existence of their life:

"As He who called you is Holy, you also be Holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be Holy, for I am Holy'" (I Peter 1:15-16).

The Coptic Church commemorates to this day, its countless martyrs, by a Coptic Calendar in which the years are dated from anno martyrum, (AM) the "Year of the Martyr". This calendar recalls to all Copts the great persecution of the Christians that began in Egypt in 284 AM.

We thank the Lord our God for these great men and women who had the dedication and courage to remain faithful to Christianity with the totality of their lives. They stood as firm WITNESSES to the Word of God. TRULY THIS IS GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST!

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