

The School of Alexandria

A Union
between the
Christian Faith
and
Philosophy

- * Researching "knowledge" Without separation from life.
- * Studying the Bible to attain Christ Himself within us.
- * Believing in the Holy Trinity to be an icon of Christ.
- * Unceasing religious education for laymen and clergy.
- * Preaching philosophers by their own language.

"The most renowned intellectual institution in the early Christian world was undoubtedly the Catechetical School (*Didascaleion*) of Alexandria, and its primary concern was the study of the Bible, giving its name to an influential tradition of scriptural interpretation."

Dom. D. Rees

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Why did St. Mark found the center for sacred science?

Alexandria, the cosmopolitan city was a home of learning, where Egyptian, Greek and Jewish cultures were nourished and thrived to create a new civilization. In such an environment, there was no other alternative but to establish a Christian center to enable the church to face the battle which was waged by the powerful schools of these cultures.

What was the aim of the School?

- 1- To satisfy the thirst of Alexandrine Christians for religious knowledge.
- 2- To give birth to numerous spiritual and well-known church leaders. Many of them were worthy to sit on the throne of St. Mark.
- 3- To win more souls to Christianity, by its missionary zeal.
- 4- To attract students from other nations, many of whom became leaders and bishops in their churches.
- 5- To establish a common awareness of the importance of education for the laymen and clergy.
- 6- To offer the world the first systematic theological studies.
- 7- To use philosophy as a weapon for converting pagan philosophers.

What was the School's program?

1- Its teaching was encyclopedic; presenting at first the whole series of profane sciences, and then rising to moral and religious philosophy, and finally to Christian theology, which was in the form of a commentary on the sacred books.

2- The School's theological program at that time consisted of three major courses:

- a. A special course to non-Christians.
 - b. A course on Christian morals.
 - c. An advanced course on divine wisdom and knowledge for the spiritual Christian.
- 3- Worship went side by side with study. Teachers and their students practised prayer, fasting and diverse ways of asceticism. In purity and integrity their lives were exemplary. Celibacy was a recommended ideal, observed by many.

A persecutor is converted to a dean of the School

Athenagoras was anxious to write against Christianity. He read the Holy Scriptures in order to aim his shafts of criticism more accurately, but he was so powerfully seized by the Holy Spirit that he became a defender of the same faith he had been harassing. He also became one of the most famous deans of the Christian Theological School.

A sweet philosopher

Pantaenus was a well-known Stoic, he embraced Christianity at the hands of Athenagoras. In 181 A.D he succeeded his teacher as dean of the Theological (Catechetical) School. He introduced philosophy and science into the School for the purpose of gaining the heretics and educated pagans.

He introduced the Coptic Alphabet, by using the Greek letters added to seven letters from the ancient Demotic letters.

Pantaenus was a kind helper to the people, who loved him, and called him, "Our Pantaenus."

A reconciliation between Christian Faith and Knowledge

Before St. Clement of Alexandria, the word "*Gnostic*" was defined as a heretic, because throughout the first two centuries, some heresies appeared under the title "*Gnostics*" in various forms. They used to depend on knowledge (*gnosis*) as the main way of salvation, minimizing the role of faith.

The Alexandrine School faced the Gnostic attitudes or heresies, not by attacking "knowledge," but by presenting a new concept of "knowledge" that helped believers even in their faith. St. Clement of Alexandria states the following:

I. The title "*Gnostic*" does not refer to a heretic but to the orthodox Christian who attains the divine knowledge from the Holy Spirit, by the illumination through Christ (the Logos) in the light of the tradition of the church.

II. The Gnostic is called to know God (*ginoskein*), to see God, and to possess Him.

III. The *Gnostic* attains this state to become equal with the angels.

IV. Christ gives us *gnosis* through baptism and reading the Scriptures.

V. The true *Gnostic* struggles to practise goodness, not in fear, but in love. He is full of love towards God and men, fulfills the will of God, is a man of prayer, witnesses to God daily (as a martyr), and never fears death.

VI. Those who know (the Son) are called sons of God and gods. They are in His likeness.

A wedding celebration between Faith and Philosophy

The Alexandrine School did not despise philosophy. We can summarize St. Clement's view on philosophy by the following points:

a. Philosophy is not a work of darkness, but it has a ray of the Logos, Who shines on it.

b. God granted the Law to the Jewish people, to prepare them to believe in Jesus Christ. In the same way philosophy had the same message to the Gentiles. The Law reveals the truth, while philosophy has truth mixed with error that was introduced by the philosophers.

c. The Greek philosophers borrowed many articles from the Old Testament.

d. Philosophers can be likened to children who need to attain maturity by Christian faith.

e. The church can Christianize the pagan world through education and culture.

The Bible as a ladder to the heavens

The Alexandrine School was interested in studying the holy Bible. All the Alexandrine Fathers used the allegorical interpretation. St. Clement used it but his disciple Origen exaggerated its use, and put it in a theory. Other Fathers used it in a moderate way.

a. Origen says that the spiritual (allegorical) meaning is the treasure hidden in a field, hidden behind every word, every letter, but even behind every iota in the written word of God.

b. Origen says that the understanding of Scripture is "the art of arts" and the science of sciences. We should pray unceasingly to God and ask others to pray for us, so that the Holy Spirit may grant us the gift of illumination.

c. Jesus Christ came to deliver us from ignorance and grant us spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is a glory that we attain in Christ.

d. Through allegorical interpretation the heavenly Groom, the Incarnate Word of God (Jesus), raises up His bride, the soul, to enter the chambers of eternal marriage and who acknowledges His own mysteries.

THE THEOLOGICAL TERMS

The Alexandrines used Greek philosophical terms to explain Christian doctrines, because of the world-wide Greek culture, and to face the philosophers and heretics. They were not limited to these terms. St. Athanasius says disputes merely about words must not be allowed to divide those who think alike.

For more details see: Fr. Tadros Y, Malaty, School of Alexandria

