

The Role of the Coptic Church in Africa

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Egypt with all its sectors; Muslims And Christians, bid farewell to a national figure known by his national situations and acclaimed national roles. A figure characterized by wisdom and loyalty to Egypt. A figure that no one can deny its sincere efforts to protect Egypt from sectarian strife, he is the writer and philosopher, Pope Shenouda III, Patron of the Orthodox Church who died at the age of 89. He left to stay in the memory of the homeland which he said about: "Egypt is not a homeland that we live in, but it is a homeland that lives in us".

The late was not just a man of religion or a spiritual leader, but also he had a genius multiple aspect personality socially, literally and politically, a character that gained respect and love. It is a figure that defended the rights of the Copts from a national perspective. He did not separate their worries from the nation's worries. He always kept on equal footing with all political parties which held opposing views with him. He succeeded in deepening the role of the Church among Christians, and connected between the Diaspora Copts and the mother church after building more than 200 churches out of Egypt in his age, particularly in Africa where the number of Orthodox Churches in it reached about 40 spread in nine African countries, so the Egyptian Church had a great and real role that grows and deepens day after day.

Pope Shenouda III carried out many patronage visits to the Continent where he visited Africa more than 12 times, it represented almost quarter of his interests towards the external world. His visit to Ethiopia in April 2008 represented a qualitative shift in the relations with it, besides his visit to Eritrea 3 times in the last decade, especially in 2003 and 2004 (the Pope had visited Ethiopia and Eritrea together in September 1973, and had visited Eritrea in May 1998). In addition, he visited each of Khartoum and Omdurman in Sudan (Transit) during his return (the Pope had visited Sudan in February 1978), where its Churches are directly associated (about 23 Churches, and 2 dioceses) to the Coptic Church leadership. This is beside Libya (which the Pope had visited, for the second time in September 2003 where he received the Gaddafi Award for Human Rights (his first visit to

Libya was in March 1972) as well as his last visit to South Africa in March 2006 (the Pope had visited South Africa 3 prior times in January 1994, August 1995, March - April 1997).

The evangelist thinking of the Coptic Church was distinct in the Pope Shenouda's era as he transferred the work of the Church to the African land through establishing the Orthodox Coptic Church in it and merging it in developmental and social projects that work on improving the conditions of the African man. It started by Kenya in 1976, extended to Zambia in 1984, Zimbabwe in 1988, and Namibia in 1990, South Africa in 1992, then to Zaire (democratic Congo) in 1995, among others.

The stage of real contact with the African Continent in the Pope Shenouda's era started on June 13th, 1976 by the ordination of Bishop Antony Mark as a Bishop for African Affairs in Cairo. Then, he went to Nairobi where the Coptic Church started to organize the Coptic missionary in Kenya whose features started to be clear by the Pope's visit in 1979 to Africa and by his stop at Nairobi where he put the stone basis for establishing the first Coptic Church in Africa which was known by Saint Antony Monastery.

At the same time, different activities have been organized by the

Coptic Centre in Nairobi that came in parallel with the missionary process. Moreover, there were classes to teach Theology to prepare Deacons and servants of Sunday schools in addition to translating a number of ritual texts and other Christian books as well as establishing houses of hospitality.

After that, the Coptic missionary has been organized in other places in Africa; Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zaire and Tanzania where the fundamental basis of this presence has been established. In the Pope's era, the missionary work had been organized in the other African countries, either through monks, married priests, deacons or secular Copts present in Africa in addition to the ordination of a general bishop for the Coptic Evangelism in Africa in 1995 on behalf of Bishop Paul which assures the Coptic Church's faith in the importance of the Evangelism in the Continent.

The Pope was interested in speaking about Evangelism in every event inside and outside Egypt. Furthermore, his permanent teaching either in the Seminary, the Care Institute or in his visits to the Diaspora churches, had its great impact in spreading the proper thinking among Christians everywhere and encouraging them to work in Africa along with avoiding working in places inhabited by Muslims for the sake of the national unity and the

integrity of the national role of the Coptic Church.

In the field of the development of the relations between the Coptic Church and Africa, the activities of the Church increased in the Pope's era either concerning the inauguration of churches, monasteries, ordination of priests and deacons, in addition to the increase in the Church's conferences all over the Continent as well as service activities. The Coptic Church's role in the health field, especially in treating AIDS, has increased. Ar-Ragaa Coptic Centre in Nairobi received a special honour in 2007 in the White House in Washington for its ranking first in the field of combating AIDS.

From here, Dr. Joseph Ramez Amin, in his book: "The Role of the Coptic Church in Africa", analyzed this role trying to throw light on it during the last quarter century, and how to develop that in a way that achieves national, spiritual, political and popular dimensions and what the Church can offer to the Continent and its peoples and standing before deviant trends that come to the Continent from the Western Christianity. Bishop Antony Mark, General Bishop of African Affairs, and Professor Dr. Ibrahim Ahmed Nasr ed-Din, Professor of Economic and Political Science in Cairo University and Chairman of the African Association for Political Science, made a presentation for the book.

The idea of the book originated from the presence of a sign on the interface of a church in South Africa during the racism period saying: "Jesus will come and with him the Egyptian Copts to free us" which assures that the roots of the Coptic Church extend in a unique contact with the Arab and African surroundings. The book reviews the Church's administrative, organizational, social, cultural and educational abilities in addition to its developmental role that is free from any non-national purposes. The writer tries to prove in a documentary way how the community work done by the Egyptian Orthodox Church in Africa serves the Egyptian foreign policy in general and consider its presence and role currently as one of the important tools of influence for Egypt in Africa.

The book is divided into two main parts, including a number of chapters and sections. The first part tackles the internal and external determinants of the Coptic Church's role in Africa on the levels of the State, the organization and the people in addition to reviewing the Church's relations with the African countries; both historically and contemporarily. Among these determinants, the issue of building churches, and what it represents for Christians, the problem of violence and the necessity of religious protection, then citizenship with all of its rights and duties.

The second part tackles the dimensions of the church's role in Africa. Dr. Joseph concluded that the Church's relationship with Africa is not limited to a certain level, yet there are 3 integrated levels for this relationship. First, on the level of the country the Church is found in, second, on the level of organization between the church from one side and the organization and African Christian movements from the other, especially that Egypt has an important role in establishing these organizations as well as helping them in carrying out their activities, third, on the popular level, represented by establishing a diocese special for service in Africa and for sending religious and service missions to the African countries.

The book ends by a future vision for the role of the Church in Africa as well as a number of appendices.

The researcher ends his book by a number of remarks. He sees that the success of the Church springs from its ability to adapt with the African circumstances and requirements. Moreover, he says that in order to put a plan for the Church's work in the future, the conclusions that have been reached by that study should be summed up as follows:

- First: the potentialities of the Church and its organizational, administrative, financial and cultural abilities as well as the wide relations with the international

and regional religious institutions, and its vital role in establishing the Independent African Churches Union, and even its position concerning Christianity in the Continent and the Orthodox position in it, all of this surpass the role, despite the diversity of this role, it diminishes if compared to potentialities that qualify for greater and more organized roles.

- Second: the relation of the Church and the State does not hinder its work abroad. Furthermore, an official trend that aims at improving the atmosphere concerning respect and protection of freedom of worship and the rights connected to it inside Egypt has appeared recently. It does not stop at the increase of the number of official approvals for renovations of Churches, but also the State started by a number of positive steps either in education, culture and media to create a suitable atmosphere for the Coptic Church's work. In addition, the State participates, represented by some of its ambassadors in Africa, at least, in the commemorative part of the Church's activities in Africa. Moreover, sometimes the State facilitate the Church's work in Africa, especially on the consular part connected to residence permits in some cases, or in its adoption to some cases that belong to

the church as the issue of As-Sultan Monastery between Egypt and Ethiopia as a public issue that belongs to the State as a whole.

- Third: the nature of roles varied from a stage to another, the religious and national roles were dominant in the old and middle ages, the political role since the 19th century diminished while the cultural and educational roles continued. What's required currently is the harmony and consistency of roles in a way that help the Church to perform the mission assigned to it.
- Fourth: most of the roles of the Contemporary Coptic Church in Africa, at the same time its relations and communication with African peoples, countries and organizations return back to individual initiatives more than being an organized work plan. In spite of establishing the General Diocese in Africa in 1976, and its carrying out to a marked role in communication with Africa, yet most of its achievements are associated to the personality of its founder, Antony Mark. Similarly, the 3 educational missions to Ethiopia in the first half of the 20th century return back to individual roles.
- Fifth: the African Continent's share of the interest of the Coptic Church is still little if compared

with its bigger interests towards the Diaspora countries and Copts.

Sixth: the quantum required for work and service in Africa is still little compared with the capabilities of the Church, its aspirations and the future role expected from the Church, especially that the financial and human potentialities needed by the Church still need intensification to fit with the heavy task assigned to it.

In the light of these conclusions, the researcher recommends some suggestions that may work to activate the role of the Church in Africa, most important of which are:

Coordinating work in Africa between the African Bishopric and other bodies qualified for the same purpose like the African Studies Department in the Coptic Studies Institute, the Coptic Church in Diaspora, the Church's leadership, the Holy Congregation in Egypt as well as the service Bishopric.

Taking the secular direction side to side with the religious direction concerning the Coptic Church's interest and role in Africa, not only for the physicians, engineers and technicians in the development and training centers abroad, but also in the thinking and organizational side, without losing the spiritual leadership, of the Bishop of Africa and his assistant.

Accelerating the establishment of

an institute specialized for Africans in Egypt subordinate to the Coptic Church, to be like a spring for those who want to travel and work in Africa, in addition to encouraging the Church's youth to learn African languages and train them scientifically and psychologically before their travel.

The Diaspora Churches may allocate a constant ratio of its revenues and donations to help the Coptic Church to work in Africa. Moreover, from the other ways of having continuous revenues is holding exhibitions for African productions organized by the Bishopric of Africa. Furthermore, it is hoped that the State will continue in its policy of settling the problem of Coptic endowments for the Church to be able to carry out its national mission internally and externally.

The possibility of coordinating with Al-Azhar- that also works in Africa and its work focuses on the West- each party shall try to support the other with what it has got of information and experiences about the regions of work in Africa as the outcome at the end is the same which is Egypt's interest and serving its policy in Africa.

Benefitting from the large boom of the Coptic Church-especially in the nineties- and the contemporary orientation that is stepped by universi-

ties in Europe and America to study Coptology and employing this interest to study the needs of the church there in Africa- and trying to implement it on real grounds.

Cairo University- as the first university in Egypt- both in the Faculty of Arts or Monuments- shall allocate departments for Coptology, concerning language, art, Coptic architecture, among others, and encourage students to study it. Moreover, there shall not be any deduction to the Coptic era that represents an important point between the Greek and Roman eras, and the Pharaonic era before them from one side and the Islamic era from the other.

Expanding in spreading Coptic centers for service in Africa as this is the suitable entrance for working in Africa.

Trying to coordinate continuously between the African research and Studies Institute- Cairo University- as it is the first scientific authority in Egypt assigned to Africa and the African Studies in the Coptic Studies Institute or any new institute in Africa subordinate to the Church, in addition to taking advantage of experiences of professors and specialists in this field and all what represent the product of their work that resulted from efforts that shall not be wasted and serve firstly and finally the national interest.