**Coptic Church Part III section 2**

**The Coptic Church And Dogmas**

**MAN & REDEMPTION**

**MAN IN GOD'S SIGHT**

Our faith in God is correlated to our life, for we acknowledge Him as the Lover of mankind who reveals Himself to His beloved creatures, likewise we can't understand ourselves as human beings, our salvation and our eternal destiny apart from our relationship with God and outside our concept of Him.

Man in God's view is not just one out of billions of creatures, but God deals with him as His own image, beloved, and His own close friend. He founded all the world for his sake, and gave him authority even over the space. Therefore, when man was totally ruined his spirit and body the Word of God was incarnated to raise him up and to renew his nature. Through Incarnation, God revealed two things:

1. God's honorable sight of man, for the Word of God Himself became man and dwelt among us.

2. He granted man freedom which sin had destroyed.

**MAN'S FREEDOM**

According to St. Cyril of Alexandria, the image of God in which man was created (Gen. 1:26) was his own free will, however, he spoiled it by his disobedience to God, thus he became incapable of interacting with God's love, freely.

**THE HUMAN NATURE**

When we speak about "man and his redemption" or about the human nature and its renewal, we refer to man's soul, mind and body, for Christ came as a perfect Man to renew "man" in his wholeness. Therefore, the Alexandria Fathers argued against the Gnostics who rejected the body and looked at it as an enemy. The Alexandrians were also interested in revealing the sanctification of mind: looking to science and philosophy as if it were not in enmity towards the mind

GOD'S ROLE IN MAN'S SALVATION

After his fall, man became in need to enjoy the risen life, and at the same time he was in need for One who can redeem him by realizing God's justice. These two requirements can't be fulfilled except through the "Incarnation and the Resurrection." The Word of God descended to us and became our Savior, to realize the following advantages to us:

*1. To declare the Creator's goodness. He created man and He is able to renew his nature.*

*2. To join us with Himself (John 17:23).*

*3. To accomplish God's sentence of death (2 Cor. 5:14) and to condemn sin (Rom. 8:3).*

*4. To undergo death by His victory over death and His resurrection (I Cor. 15:21).*

*5. To conquer Satan, our enemy (I John 3:1).*

*6 To raise us up to heaven (Eph. 2:6).*

*7. To renew our nature in Him, and grant us participation in His divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).*

*8. To realize universality of the Church, by joining the Gentiles together with the Jews through faith in one Body.*

*9. To grant us the true knowledge (Matt. 11:27), for Jesus alone knows the Father.*

**MAN'S ROLE IN SALVATION**

Grace is the center of the Alexandria theology, for God "first loved us" (I John 4:19), foreknew us (Rom. 8:29), chose us, predestined us, called us, justified us and glorified us. He wills, decides and acts for our salvation, but we never enjoy this free salvation unwillingly. God wills that all men might be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth(I Tim. 2:4), for He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turns from his way and lives (Ezek. 33:11). He offered His Son as the propitiation for the whole world (I John 2;2). Nevertheless, God asked us to choose the way we desire (Deut. 30:15,19), and to declare this choice through practical faith. Thus the good deeds that we practise by the divine grace are necessary and essential.

H.H. Pope Shenouda III, in his book "Salvation in the Orthodox Concept" presents many proofs of the importance of "good deeds" to our salvation:

1. Evil work leads to eternal condemnation (Gal. 5:19,21; Eph. 5:5,6).

2. Judgment will be based upon our deeds (Matt. 16:27; John 5:28, 29).

3. Works are the fruit of true faith (Luke 3:8, James 2:14).

4. Through good deeds we witness to our faith (James 2:18; Matt. 7:16, 17).

5. Through our good deeds we witness to be children of God (I John 2:29; 3:9, 10).

6 Works make faith perfect (James 2:22; 1: 2 7). We have to distinguish between many kinds of good works as mentioned in the Holy Bible:

1. The works of man's own righteousness, when man trusts in his own power, his salvation is ruined

2. The works of the Lam), like circumcision, preserving the Sabbath in a solid way etc. If these works are performed literally they ruin the spiritual life.

3 Good works which are the fruits of faith: The believer leans on the Lord's breast and asks for the work of His divine **grace under the** guidance of the Holy Spirit; these works are necessary to our salvation.

**THE CHURCH**

**NATURE OF THE CHURCH**

The Church occupies the heart of the Bible, for she is the object of the redemption which the Bible proclaims. God purchased her at the cost of Christ's Blood (Acts 20:28).

Understanding the Church means understanding the relationship between God and man, manifested in, the divine plan of salvation, God's Fatherhood, the kingdom of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the means of grace, the lessons from the history of mankind, the destiny of men ... etc. It is through the church that God makes known His redeeming wisdom even to the heavenly hosts (Eph. 3:10).

The fathers of Alexandria adopted the spiritual concepts of the Church and did not consider it a political or a human organization, for many reasons:

a. Throughout the past twenty centuries, the Church of Alexandria was isolated from politics and had no civil authority.

b. The Alexandrines’' view of knowledge (gnosis) as a divine gift constantly granted by the Fattier through His Son, attracted the clergymen to practicing contemplation, studying the Holy Bible and worshipping without being involved in church administration.

c. Even before the appearance of the monastic movement, the Egyptian clergymen and laity practised the ascetic life. Their minds and hearts were more often lifted up to the heavenly kingdom than to church administration.

1. **COVENANT WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD:** In the Old Testament, believers looked at the community as a whole, as the

people of God and the children of Abraham who enjoyed a covenant with God (Gen. 17). In the New Testament Christ offered a new covenant giving HIS Blood and Body, and presenting them as food to His people thus capable of granting them eternal life (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25).

The Church of the New Testament inherited the promises that were given through the Old Testament, but in a new and deep concept. Therefore the church is ancient and is new at the same time. We, the members of the Church enjoy the ancient prophesies through the new life which we practise in Jesus Christ who never ages.

**2. THE MOTHER OF BELIEVERS:** The Church is virgin because of her Purity (2 Cor. 11:2), and at the same time she is a mother who brings forth children of God unceasingly. Her children are a fruitful witness to Christ.

**3. THE BODY OF CHRIST:** The Church is the Body of Christ that grows towards perfection; her children enjoy communion in the Body and Blood of the Lord.

**4. A new creation in Christ:** The believer receives the rebirth in baptism, and he becomes a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), he dies with Christ and also rises with Him (Eph. 2).

The work of the Holy Spirit is the continuous sanctification of the believers so that they might become in the likeness of Christ, the Head.

**5. THE BIRTH OF CHRIST:** The Church waits for her Christ who will come to perform His eternal spiritual marriage with her (Rev. 19:7). Christ called Himself the Bridegroom (Matt. 9:14,15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5-33-35- Matt. 25:1-3). Through this concept we acknowledge that the Lord who is the Judge, is cming not to judge us but to grant her to be close to Him, to unite with Him and to enjoy His glories. As the Groom, He is jealous (Exod. 20:5; 34:24; Deut 4: 25; 5:9; 6:51), for He cannot be in communion with sin. Every sin we commit is a crime not only against His law but rather against His love, for by sin we break the heart of our Heavenly Groom. This concept also means that our unity with God is eternal and indissoluble.

**6. THE DWELLING PLACE OF CHRIST,** that grows as the holy temple of God (Eph. 2:21 etc.), a spiritual temple, and a sanctuary in which the Holy Trinity dwell.

7. THE CHURCH IS THE HOUSE OF FAITH, the house that preserves the deposit of faith without deviation.

8. THE CHURCH IS THE HOUSE OF SALVATION, like the house of Rahab (Jos. 2). There is no salvation **outside it**

9. THE COMMUNITY OF LOVE: The Church reveals the kingdom of God on earth, as the pure kingdom of love, her goal is that every soul may enjoy eternal life.. Whoever belongs to the church but has no love, is truly outside the church, for he does not know God (I John 3:14, 16; 4:7,8). This love unites us all in God who is Love, and unites the earthly creatures with the heavenly hosts, men with angels, the militant members with those who are victorious.

10. THE ICON OF HEAVEN: The Heavenly One descended to our land, made of us His heavenly Church. Thus we live on earth

with a heavenly heart and high thought, participating with the heavenly creatures in their hymns, joy and peace.

11. EVER-YOUTHFUL CHURCH: The Church never ages (spiritually) nor weakens, for she is united with her Groom who never ages. The Groom grants her His Holy Spirit which renews her

unceasingly, therefore her youth is renewed like the eagle's (Ps. 103:5). "Even though our outward man perishes, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" 2 Cor. 4:16.

12. **THE FIRST-BORN CHURCH:** Her Groom, the Frst-Born One, grants all her members the glory of becoming first-born in Him.

**THE CHURCH CHARACTERISTICS:**

1. The Alexandrian Fathers spoke about Church democracy.

It is the peoples' right to choose their shepherds, and it is the duty of the clergyman to show his loving fatherhood and not his authority.

Every member of the church - man, woman or a child - has his own role in the church, as we shall explain when we speak about "the Church of the People."

2. Spirituality is the common feature of all aspects of church life and activities.

3. The Alexandrian Fathers- like St. Cyril The Great- state that "Unity," based on the "One faith" without deviation is a characteristic of the church.

**THE HEAVENLY CREATURES**

THE COPTIC CHURCH AND THE WESTERN THEOLOGY When Calvin spoke about "angels," he said, "It is also our duty cheerfully to remain in ignorance of what is not for our advantage to know"; and Barth began his discussion of angels with so much hesitation. The western theologians are inclined to avoid talking about the heavenly creatures, looking to modern man even though he has no objection to the existence of angels theologically or logically but he does not like to describe them on psychological bases, looking to this speech as a kind of myth and imagination. As for the Coptic Church, we find that the heavenly creatures have had their own strong print on the writings of the Fathers of Alexandria, especially Origen, as well as on her hymns, feasts, icons, church buildings etc.

Concerning the patristic writings, there was a clear line of thought as regards to the heavenly creatures in the early church, especially the writings of the School of Alexandrian which adopted the biblical thoughts. For the Holy Bible refers to them throughout all its books, from Genesis to the Revelation. These references throughout the two testaments is not meaningless or without aim.

As to Church hymns, believers who receive the pledge of the heavenly life waiting for being in the likeness of angels chant hymns with the angels, blessing them, requesting their prayers, setting feasts in their names, especially the Archangel Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, the four Living creatures, the twenty-four incorporeal priests etc.

The Coptic Church was interested in icons of the heavenly creatures, either portraying them alone, or in the icons presenting events of the life of Christ, or in the icons of saints as they appear holding crowns on top of the saints' heads. These indicate the accessibility of heaven to the believers, and that believers struggle to attain resemblance to angels.

Angels are highly considered, when we speak about the Church as an icon of heaven. In the "Doxology of Morning" we sing: "Hail to the church, the house of the angels." The Church as defined by an ancient Coptic homily is "a place of consolation, a place of meetings of angels and a place of the Cherubim and the Seraphim."

**THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS**

St. Paul the Apostle speaks about the angels as "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation" Heb. 1: 14. This does not mean that they are less in rank or glory than believers, but means that they love them and serve them for their salvation. What is their ministry to the believers?

1. The suffering church finds a kind of heavenly joy through her feeling that she is accompanied by angels, her heart is involved in the eternal glory and the communion with the heavenly creatures,

Therefore Origen says "do not waver at the solitude of the desert; it is during your sojourn in the tents that you will receive the manna from heaven and eat the bread of angels.

1. Stephen the Deacon, and Paul the Apostle spoke about the active role of angels in receiving the Law (Acts 7:35; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2-3). Origen states that angels are friends of the Groom who prepare the Church - people of God - during the time of her espousal to meet the Groom personally. He says "When I was preparing

myself for my marriage with the Son of the King and the Firstborn of every creature, the holy angels followed me and ministered to me, bringing me to Law as a wedding presented''. [These are the angels who are called the guardians of children and who always see the face of the Father in heavenly].

St. Clement of Alexandria refers to Daniel (10:13-21) when he says: "The presiding powers of the angels have been distributed according to the nations and the cities.

1. The coming of the Groom, our Lord Jesus Christ, does not stop the work of the angels nor their acting love on behalf of the Kingdom of Christ within us. The New Testament declares the appearance of angels throughout the life of Christ on earth from the announcement of His incarnation till His Ascension. Origen states: "When the angels saw the Prince of the heavenly host touring the places of earth, followed the way He had opened, following their Lord and obeyed the Will of Him who put those who believe in Him under their guardianship. The angels are in the service of your salvation... They say among themselves, "If He has put on mortal flesh, how can we remain doing nothing? Come, angels, let us all descend from heaven." That is why there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising and glorifying God when Christ was born. Everything is filled with angels71.

St. Athanasius states that angels who descended from heaven to announce the coming of Christ, ascended to heaven on His ascension to announce to the heavenly creatures that they might open their doors to the King of Glory.

1. Origen clarifies the communion of the Church with the heavenly creatures, for he says: [If the angel of the Lord encompass those who fear God and brings them deliverance (Ps. 33:8), it would seem that when a number of people duly meet together for the glory of Christ, each will have his own angel, encompassing him, since they all fear the Lord. Each angel will be with the man he has been commissioned to guard and to direct. Thus when the saints assemble, there exist two churches one of men and the other of angels].

St. Clement of Alexandria sees that angels have their own role in helping clergymen in the ministry of the children of God, and Origen speaks of their role in the ministry of the church sacraments and in the repentance of souls 11, and in helping believers in their prayers.

St. Clement speaks about angels' assistance to souls in their spiritual progress, and Origen speaks about their grief over man's fall in sin -3.

1. Origen correlates between angels and our entrance to paradise, especially the martyrs. He comments on the Apostle's words that we became a spectacle to angels and men (I Cor. 4:9), saying that angels look to the martyrs in wonder, and that they rejoice with us in heaven.

**THE SAINTS**

THE SAINTS AND THE BOND OF LOVE

The Saints are dear brothers who have struggled like us and have departed to Paradise. They are not dead, but are sleeping, as our Lord said (John 11: 11), and as St. Paul called them (I Thess. 4:13).

Our early fathers spoke clearly and in detail about our relationship with Saints. The Saints in Paradise are the triumphant members of the same one church in which we are militant members. We, the triumphant and militants, are members of the Church, which is the one Body of Jesus Christ. The triumphant become invisible members because of the death of their bodies, and then militants ire the visible ones. This is man's point of view, but in God's sight, we are all a visible holy family.

They departed from earth, but did not leave the church; their love toward their brothers did not cease by their departure and dwelling in Paradise. The death of their bodies does not sever the bond of mutual love between them and us-, on the contrary it increases in depth and strength. Their prayers for the salvation of all the world never cease. They pray for us, and we venerate them as they are our holy and dear friends.

**ICONS OF SAINTS**

We venerate the icons of saints and put them on the iconstasis (icon-stand). Church walls and doors are hung with icons, also our homes etc., as a sign of our communion with them in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Coptic Icons have their own characteristics as we have mentioned in the book : "Church, House of **God."**

**THE INTERCESSIONS OF SAINTS (THEIR PRAYERS FOR US)**

We all - the triumphant and militants - as one Body, have love that never fails (I Cor. 13:8), for our interaction is unceasing. Those who preceded us pray for us, and we through love - pray for those who departed, and God in His Fatherhood appreciates this mutual love.

Our belief in intercession is biblical, as it appears from the following points:

1. Saints who departed are still alive, for it is said, "When he called the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob for He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all are alive in Him" Luke 20:37,38; Matt. 22:32; Mark 12:26. Moses and Elijah appeared on Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:28-33), and many bodies of the saints were raised on Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 27:52,53).

2. God disclosed many secrets which concern the future of His men in both the Old and the New Testaments (Acts 20:22, 23, 29, 30; 2 Pet. 1: 14), no wonder that He reveals our conditions to the saints who are in Paradise. Their knowledge about us is a gift from God to them. Therefore Abraham knew that Moses and other prophets had come (Luke 16; 29-3 1), and those who are in heaven rejoice for the repentance of a sinner (Luke 15:7-10).

3. The believers who departed have a kind of privilege before God, therefore the Lord blessed Isaac for the sake of Abraham his

father (Gen. 26:5), and He was gracious to Israel and had compassion on them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (2 kings 13:23). He did not tear down the kingdom in the days of Solomon for the sake of his father David (I kings 11: 11- 13). God raised a dead man when his corpse touched the bones of Elisha the prophet, revealing the great position of this prophet in God's sight (2 Kings 13:20,21).

4. We, the militants ask for the intercessions of the saints, as Jacob did when he asked for the intercessions of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac (Gen. 32:9). Moses asked for the intercession of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 32:13)... For God honors those who honor Him (1 Sam. 2:30). He attributes Himself to them (Gen. 26:24; 28:13), and hears their supplications... Therefore the rich man appealed to Abraham (Luke 16:27,28).

Origen says: "It is not against truth, that we ask saints and seek for their intercessions... but that they might help us." St. Athanasius says: "0 lady and queen, the mother of God (Theotokos) intercede for us."