

## **Monasticism and Christian Unity**

Reverend fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Ever since the world knew monasticism, the monastic life has been the token of unity among the various churches of Christ.

As you all know, the Egyptian saint Anthony the Great paved the way to the rising of Christian monasticism. Later on, his biography written by St Athanasius drew a lot of young people in the west to the monastic life, whatever their churches. Others like St Hilarion, a disciple of Antony, founded monasticism in Palestine. St Augustine as well, influenced by the Life of Antony, founded monasticism in North Africa.

St Pachomius, a contemporary of Antony, founded communal monasticism in Upper Egypt; and a bit later St Macarius the Great attracted the attention of many Christians from all over the world to the desert of Scete in Lower Egypt. Among these were personalities such as Arsenius from Rome, John Cassian, Rufinus, Basil the Great and others.

And so Monasticism in its inception was a fertile soil for the meeting of Christians from all parts of the world; in unison and harmony in the one Spirit, and a feeling of oneness in the body of Christ however tongues or cultures may differ.

Plurality in monasticism will never be able to rule out oneness of experience. Throughout all ages the popularity of some monastic writers has disregarded all differences in Church doctrine, whether ancient or modern. In all monasteries alike,

the libraries have never been devoid of the Letters of St Antony, the Homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, the Rules of St Basil of Cappadocia, the Homilies of saint Isaac the Syrian, the writings of Barsanuphius, of John of Dalyatha, or the Ladder of John Climacus .

In modern times, when churches began to be mutually open up, common access to modern monastic literature has ensued. The writings and biographies of recent saints such as Silouan of Mount Athos and Seraphim of Sarov have come to be widely read in our monasteries. The rules of St Benedict, the biography of St Francis, St. Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of the child Jesus have now gained wide popularity in our monastic circles.

Now, I would like to shed light on a personal experience I have gone through in St Macarius Monastery at Wadi al-Natrun, in which I have had a glimpse of how monasticism can play an important role in Christian unity far away from official dialogues and the conferences of prelates.

Ever since Fr Matta al-Maskeen (known in the English-speaking world as Matthew the Poor) became a monk, and with the appearance of his writings—particularly *Orthodox Prayer Life* in which he quotes saints and lives from all churches (an unprecedented phenomenon in the Coptic church)—he has attracted the attention of monks from churches all over the world. This triggered an age of friendship and love between St

Macarius Monastery and many Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries as well as other orders: Dominicans, Jesuits, Franciscans, etc. whether from Egypt or from abroad. For the first time it became customary for monks from foreign monasteries to come and have retreats in St Macarius Monastery and thus exchange spiritual experience between east and west.

St Macarius Monastery has had its gates wide open to Catholic monks and religious in Egypt many of whom came to spend a period of spiritual exercise in our monastery. Some as well celebrated their mass in one of its churches.

Special friendship as well has been fostered between the Benedictine fathers of Chevetogne and our own monastery. The late Fr. Emmanuel Lanne used for the last 34 years, before his departure, to spend about a whole month every year in our monastery. Fr. Ugo Zanetti is also among those of Chevetogne who spend long periods of time with us. He has spent a great effort in cataloguing our manuscripts.

Visits have also been exchanged between the monks of St Macarius and those of Solesmes and Bellefontaine, which have resulted in publishing five volumes by Fr. Matta al-Maskeen in French in the series titled *Spiritualité Orientale*, which has rendered his works well known and widely read in most French speaking monasteries and convents. It has also resulted in exchanging publications like the series *Spiritualité Orientale* and periodicals like *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, *Cistercian Studies* and *Irenikon*.

A very profound love relationship has been laid between St Macarius Monastery and the ecumenical monastery of Bose. Bose has held an international conference on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the departure of Fr. Matta al-Meskeen, since three months. It has also exerted a commendable effort in translating many of the works of Fr. Matta into Italian. St Macarius Monastery will tonsure a Coptic Orthodox monk in the monastery of Bose under the auspices of H.H. Pope Tawadros II Pope of Alexandria and the see of St Mark. This marks the strengthening of the bonds of love between the two monasteries and consequently between the Coptic and the Catholic Churches.

It is remarkable that Pope Tawadros, after ascending to the throne of St Mark in Egypt, paid his first visit to the Vatican accompanied by an abbot of a Coptic monastery as a member of his delegation. He visited many Italian monasteries not as touristic sites but in order to meet with their congregations in a friendly spirit which would help engage both sides in fruitful dialogue. Some of the discussions developed into the need for Church unity for which all the Churches of Christ yearn. The same has taken place when visiting Orthodox monks in Russia where a treaty for mutual cooperation between Egyptian and Russian monasteries was signed.

Such is a small example of how Coptic monasticism in Egypt has managed to create spiritual relations with many monasteries without resorting to argumentation or theological polemics; and I think that there are other monasteries in east and west that have

gone through similar experience. For monastic spirituality ever since it began in the third century was in general uncomfortable with philosophical controversies. Rather it focused mainly on spiritual unity among different monks. Maybe my presence among you today is one of the fruits of spiritual love far away from theological debates.

I hope the day would come when all the barriers between Christian monasteries are definitively lifted. Maybe this would be an incentive for the Church to take up the same method in order to fulfill the wish of the Lord Jesus “that they also may be one in Us” (Jn 17:21).

Bishop Epiphanius