**Coptic Church Part III section 1**

**The Coptic Church And Dogmas**

**ALEXANDRIA AND CHRISTIAN DOGMAS**

**Dogmas,** to the Coptic Orthodox Church, are not merely theological concepts concerning God, man, church, eternal life, heavenly creatures, demon etc.., to be discussed among clergymen, scholars and laymen, but are, in essence, daily experiences each member of the church has to live. In other words, dogmas representing our faith in God through various aspects have one message, i.e. our communion with God the Father in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, by His Holy Spirit. Thus, we conceive of our redemption, and our membership of the church, a deep understanding of the Holy Bible, an acceptance of the Kingdom of God within our souls, a communion with the heavenly creatures and the experience of eternal life.

**DOGMAS AND INTEGRAL CHURCH LIFE**

The Christian Church is not merely a school involved in researches and teaching dogmas, but an institution which worships God and serves mankind. It works for the transformation and the renewal of this world, and hopefully awaits the world to come. Truly, the Christian Church would not be the church as we know it without Christian dogmas. Dogmas interpret our whole philosophy of the church through repeated practise of our faith through the holy tradition (the holy Scriptures, worship, behavior and preaching). All these elements represent different aspects of the one inseparable church life.

If we look at the relationship between the dogmas and the holy Scripture, we observe that they are not only based on the Scripture but that any dogmas which has no base in it is invalid. Dogmas in fact are mirrors of the holy Scripture. They explain the holy Scriptures and attract men to enjoy its spirit.

Similarly, we can say that dogmas are the way in which believers are guided to worship God in truth and in spirit. True worship reveals our dogmas in simplicity.

Dogmas correlate to our ascetic attitude. The early Alexandrian theologians and clergymen were true ascetics, and as a result asceticism still strongly affects our theology. This is not by denying the needs of our bodies, as some scholars charge, but by insisting on the soteriological aspect: The early Coptic ascetics were involved in enjoying the redeeming deeds of the Holy Trinity, i.e. in enjoying the sanctification of the soul, mind, body, gifts etc.. through communion with the Father in His Son through the Holy Spirit.

Early Egyptian asceticism was biblical. It did not hate the body, its senses and capacities nor did it deny the human free will, or despise earthly -life and all its properties. Coptic asceticism in its essence was not an isolation from men, but rather enjoying unity with God. This attitude affected our theology and dogmas, through concentration on the "deification," i.e. the return of man to the original image of God by restoring his soul, mind, body etc.., in preparation for Paradise.

Concerning the relationship between dogmas and behavior or practical faith'. we have to distinguish between only believing (without practising) and a living belief, for as St. James says: "even demons believe" Jam. 2:19.

Concerning the relationship between dogmas or theology as a whole and practical religious life, we can quote Alan Richardson: "Religious people very often feel that theology leaves a cold dead

abstraction in the place of what was once a warm and living faith. Theology, like any other study can become dry and academic.. The fact is that religion without theology is as unthinkable and incomplete as theology is without religion: the two are as complementary to one another as theory and practices.

The close relationship between dogmas and preaching was well exercised through the ordination of the majority of the early deans of the School of Alexandria as Popes or Bishops of this See. Those men were well educated in theology, and dogmas and were highly capable of preaching and practising pastoral care.

In conclusion, the true theologian is not merely a man who is involved in discussing or teaching dogmas, but also one who accepts the dogmas of the church of which he is a member. Therefore Origen calls him "a man of the church. " He is not only a spokesman of the church but he practises its life.

Dogmas are what is believed, taught, confessed and practised.

**DOGMAS AND KNOWLEDGE**

One of the very important characteristics of the church of Alexandria was her broad-mindedness and openness of heart towards philosophers. While leaders of the church in other countries looked at philosophy as an enemy of faith (like St. Justin and Tertullian), our Fathers embraced philosophers with love, treated them as children in need of the, church to help them grow through faith into manhood. Thus the Alexandrians saw faith not as opposite to the mind and knowledge, but as a satisfaction of mind and an elevation of thoughts through which one could enjoy Divine knowledge. This knowledge was thus superior to philosophical knowledge. God grants faith to men who are His rational creatures, and He would not destroy the minds which He created.

During the second century, St. Clement of Alexandria, a theologian of great piety, wide reading and classical scholarship, believed that the spiritual believer was a Gnostic, giving the word "gnosis" (knowledge) a Christian meaning, instead of the common meaningof that time which signified "heresy." He says: "Gnosis is the principle and author of every action conforming to the Logos," the grace of gnosis comes from the Father through the Son.

Faith, in our concept, embraces all human nature, it signifies not only our souls and hearts but also our minds and thoughts.

 **THE "DOGMA" BASED ON "TRUTH" AND "LOVE"**

**Dogmas,** as we have seen, are the interpretation of our experience of God, in the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ. This experience throughout the ages does not alter, for Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:18). The disciples and apostles (and bishops afterwards) did not sit around a table and agree to teach new dogmas, but rather they preached their Christian experience. As St. John says, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you" I John 1:3. Thus all Christian dogmas resulted from Church's experience of the Crucified and Risen Christ, "Truth and "Love" at the same time. We receive these dogmas as the unchangeable truth that we must holdfast, with "love."

The Alexandrian Popes (bishops) as theologians and pastors at the same time looked to dogmas as an expression of evangelic truth integrated with love. They were very zealous in defending the Orthodox faith and dogmas against any heresy, not only in Egypt but in all Christendom, offering their lives as sacrifices on behalf of the church. They were very firm and strict concerning the faith they had once received (2 Tim. 12,14), and some historians accuse them of violence, but in fact they were truly loving and kind men. St. Cyril wrote to Nestorius telling him that he would never find a person who loved him like Cyril, but never would this love be at the expense of his faith. He hated heresy and error but loved the soul of the heretic and desired his salvation.

 **DOGMA AND THEOLOGICAL TERMS**

The Alexandrian Fathers used theological terms to explain the divine truths and their deep meanings, and to defend the Orthodox faith against heresies, but they were not enslaved to the terms themselves. St. Athanasius who devoted his life to defending Christ's Godhead stated that disputes merely about words must not be suffered to divide those who think alike.

 **DOGMA AND RENEWAL**

The Coptic Orthodox Church is well known as a conservative church, especially in dogmas and doctrines. At the same time, it progresses not by embracing new doctrines or new "articles of faith," but by explaining the same faith "once given to the saints" (Jude 3) in a contemporary language.

**OUR BELIEF IN GOD**

**GOD IS LOVE**

"God is love" I John 4:8. He is neither an idea that we believe in, nor a Supreme Being isolated from mankind in His heaven far away from our world, but He is the Lover of mankind, He granted us His divine knowledge to enjoy His love and to touch His Fatherhood. He would like to be very near to mankind, to unite them to Himself, to live within their souls, and grants us participation in His Glory.

In other words, God reveals Himself to us, not to involve us in theoretical discussions, nor to practise His authority upon us, but to attract us to Himself as children to their true Father in whom they find the essence of life, satisfaction, immortality and eternal glorification.

**REVELATION OF GOD**

God created man in His image, as the most perfect of His creations on earth. God did not plan to leave man in Paradise alone, but to embrace him as His beloved, to meet him (Gen. 18:17), and to reveal Himself, His nature, His mysteries and His will to him.

God spoke to mankind through nature (Rom. 1:20). As they refused to hear the voice of the natural law, He presented His written Law through Moses and sent His prophets to them (Heb. 1: 1,2). At last, the Incarnate Son of God came to enlighten their inner life and to set His Kingdom within them. He came to reveal the mystery of God, the Lover and Savior of men. His revelation has its effect on our nature and eternal future.

**MYSTERY OF GOD**

"Mystery" in Christianity does not mean that a believer takes obscure dogmas without understanding them, or that these dogmas are unacceptable to his mind. Our minds cannot conceive this naturally without God's grace and revelation. Mystery does not oppose man's thinking but is supreme and inconceivable without God's help.

God created us as rational beings. He reveals Himself **and His** deeds to us, not to abolish our minds but to elevate them so that all our human nature can accept Him and acknowledges His mysteries.

**MONOTHEISM AND TRINITARIAN FAITH**

Our faith in its essence is a call to enjoy the experience of the One God, Lover of mankind. The Old and the New Testaments confirm the belief in the One God, but the Old Testament deals with this matter in its passive aspect, for its aim was to keep the believers away from idols and from practising the abominations of nations that accompanied paganism (2 Kings 21:2; Chorn. 28:3).

The New Testament witnesses to the One God in a positive aspect, for it does not only declare the oneness of God but it also deepens our faith in God by revealing the "Trinitarian" faith. In fact this faith does not oppose "Monotheism," but emphasizes it by revealing some mysteries of the One God and giving interpretation to these mysteries.

**THE TRINITARIAN DOGMA AND THE BIBLE**

The Holy Trinity was referred to at Jesus' baptism (Joh. 1:27-33). Besides our baptism is fulfilled in the name of the Holy Trinity (Matt. 28:19). St. Paul benediction enumerates the Trinity in 2 Cor. 13:14.

In the Old Testament we find the Trisagion (holy, holy, holy) of Isaiah's Vision (6:3); and the name of God is mentioned in plural "Elohim," even in the Deuteronomy 6:4 "unity" passage [see Gen. 1:26, 11 :7].

Is it necessary to believe in the Holy Trinity?

1. The "Trinitarian" faith solves many problems which was caused by the absolute "monotheistic" faith. For example, we say that God is love and His love is eternal; does this mean that there was another being whom God loved eternally? We can not say that He loves Himself eternally; this means He is selfish (God forbids!). We cannot say that He eternally loved by power and not by action, and after the creation of the heavenly and earthly beings His love became in action; this means that creation was necessary for God to realize His love and changes it from power to action.

What we say concerning love might be repeated in regards to other divine characteristics like peace-making, mercy etc..

Truly if we accept the Holy Trinity as three Hypostaseis in one divine essence, this problem will be easily solved. This faith in the One God of three Hypostasies declares the act of love, unity and peace in God as an eternal action of the Holy Trinity. The Father loved the Son and there was no time when the Father did not love the Son. Love as a divine character was eternally in power and in action, for "Love" is God Himself who loved eternally, and was not in need of the creation to declare His characteristic' s. God's love to us is an extension of His work and eternal loving nature. Then the Trinitarian faith reveals God as a dynamic, personal and communal Being and not a solid being.

2. Someone may say that the "Trinitarian" faith may incline to "polytheism." We reply that the Son is the Word of the Father; many religions believe that the words of God are eternal. the Word of God is not "outside" God, but is one with Him, as brightness *that shines from the light. The Father was not without His Word, as light is never without brightness. Thus our belief in the Son does not mean Polytheism.*

The Holy Spirit is the "Life," and the Father is the "Being." This "Being" is not separated from "Life..."

It is important to believe in God who is "the rational, Being" one essence, eternally simple, for the three are not **separated, nor has** one existed before the others. They are **like the fire which has flame,** light and heat at the same time.

3. St. Clement of Alexandria states that all expressions concerning God are used because of our weakness and disability. In other words, we must not understand "One" here as a number among other numbers, but it means an unspeakable unity. "Monotheism" cannot be tasted nor understood as "Numbering," for it makes God as a solid Being subject to numbering. St. Clement says: [God is One, and beyond one, and above the Monad itself].

Let us not understand the Oneness of God in a material manner.

4. We should not understand the expression "the Son" in a materialistic way as if the Son had an essence other than that of the Father, but He is the Brightness who never separates from the "Light.11

Can God not bring forth a Son? For we cannot accept God as a solid, being unable to bring forth! Every energetic essence has to bring forth something. Fire brings forth light and radiates heat, the radio element brings forth energy, and the human mind brings forth wise thoughts. God can never be a solid Being, but eternally He brings forth the Son, for He is the "Light" who brings forth "the Light." Truly a light that brings forth no light is darkness.

Bringing forth the Son eternally reveals the nature of God as the Loving Being, who in His infinite love brings forth the Son offering to Him His own divine essence being One with Him.

5. St. Athanasius clarifies that the "Son" is called "the Word of God," to confirm the oneness of the essence, that no one may think in two essences.

6. The unity of the Holy Trinity as a unity of love, of continuous

movement, has an effect on our lives, for we **imitate the Holy** Trinity through our unity together in the Holy Trinity.

7. The "Trinitarian" faith has its effect on our daily life and on our eternal future. For through it we acknowledge the fatherhood of God, enjoy the divine friendship of Jesus our Savior, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the door of hope in the eternal glories will always be opened before us.

8. The Holy Trinity declares the concept of "perfection," i.e., the perfection of the unity of the Holy Trinity and not the theoretical
**A the solid perfection which has no movement of love.**

**THE HOLY TRINITY AND HUMAN MIND**

Our Trinitarian faith does not oppose the human mind as someone may think, for if it is called a "Mystery" this is because of our need for a divine revelation to accept it. Even "monotheism" has many mysteries that the mind cannot understand by itself. For example, all religious men say that God fills heaven and earth and He in infinite, at the same time there is a divine throne. Is this divine throne limited? How does it look like in heaven? How can God

occupy the whole world and at the same time He is present in every room and in every house of God, not partially for He is undivided, but He is entirely present?

The human soul may be used as an example to explain the Trinitarian faith. Every soul is "Existent," rational and alive. Although

man has one soul and its being is distinguished from its mind and its life, the three are inseparable.

Fire has three self-properties that look like the hypostasis, for it

has flame, the light that is begotten of the flame, and the heat that proceeds from it.

It was very important to reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity so that our salvation can be realized. The Father, Lover of men, sent His Word incarnate to bear our sins and pay our debts, and sent His Holy Spirit which raises us to His Glory.

Our Trinitarian faith uncovers the real divine love, for God does not seek our destruction, or have authority over us as some existentialists say, He is "Love," that longs for our adoption so that we might be united with Him and share in His eternal Glories

