

## **An American Viewpoint of an Egyptian Mother**

As an American Protestant entering an Orthodox church for the first time, I caught Abouna Daniel out front of St. John's and told him about my study of how we got our bible, and how my studies had introduced me to the early church. I explained that I was here to learn more.

(Alexandria played a prominent role in the assembly of our bible, and I had learned of the almost unparalleled role Athanasius played in the Faith. I had seen "Alexandria" on the building and thought this was a good place to start.)

Abouna said "Stay around a while and see how you like it." I replied "How I like it is irrelevant. If it's not true and I love it, I'm leaving. If it's true and I hate it, I must conform to it." And so began my encounter with the Copts.

At first, only a few people welcomed and came to help me, but that was enough. After all, I didn't come for a social club, I came seeking God.

I hear much talk about people leaving the church — mostly young ones. I read and participated in an exchange recently where a priest was asking why others believed this was happening. What was making them leave? It is to this question that I'd like to offer some thoughts.

It has been said, rightly, that the Church is our mother and God is our Father. Well, the part of mother Copts get to see, happens to be Egyptian — which means she is always in our business; telling us what path to take, unwilling to change the things that brought her through troubles and suffering that we, in our young lives, have not experienced. She is bossy and controlling.

Well, that is how she is often seen by her children, who grew up in her house, anyway.

But I'd like to tell you about mom from the perspective of my wife and me. I'm sure we are considered "the Americans" and seem to be somewhat unique in this: neither of us married into this family. We were adopted, so to speak. No Egyptian friends, family, spouse, nothing — total strangers.

We came from the American Evangelical background, where my wife says "Churches are like girlfriends. No need to commit. When things don't go well, you leave and go down the street to another one and start again there."

For us, as adopted kids entering into an Egyptian home, with an Egyptian mother, things look quite different. We are in awe. Mother is nosey, yes. But it is only because she loves us.

She is old and wise, and knows the suffering we can bring on ourselves by wrong choices. And she tries to protect us and steer us to the path of peace and safety. She bears not only her wisdom, but the wisdom of the entire family through the centuries. She suffers when we suffer. She cleans and bandages our wounds. She feeds us. She clothes us in humility.

All this can seem like a controlling “old mom” to many who have never been an orphan, who have always lived this way, but to us she is a treasure unlike any we have known.

And yes, the deep scars she bears after keeping the faith through persecution and mistreatment, a suffering which would have stopped the moment she was willing to abandon her family, but never even considered it as she is a faithful mother, can show sometimes. She’s not perfect, but she is beautiful. Her dress is soaked with the tears of seeing her children abused and killed for belonging to her family — the stains of those tears make her dress more beautiful than the finest silk in all the world.

It took several years for the community at St. John to truly welcome us as their own, though from the beginning Abouna Daniel was a trusted friend and spiritual adviser. A few younger Copts welcomed and helped us through the liturgy. Other than that, we were outsiders. But it didn’t matter.

I was a tattooed biker American wearing a tee-shirt to church. I knew I didn’t fit in. I quickly learned of the suffering and deep faith of the Copts, and figured such persecution knits a people together closely, and probably makes them cautious of outsiders. I was partaking of a treasure paid for and preserved by the blood of their parents, and I was grateful.

I suppose it may be because word got back to them that I wasn’t there to change them, or that I was zealous with love for this church, or that I sought to humble myself under them, or that I became a servant at times — I don’t know. But after a few years I began to be embraced. Not just by the American born, but by the Egyptians who didn’t even speak English. The ones who never smiled began smiling at me. And it meant more to me than all the warm welcomes I received at all the American churches I’ve ever attended. It was something not given lightly or cheaply.

I’d like to challenge all the young, American born Copts.

I’d like to challenge you all to first seek God. He is here. And if nobody else ever was kind to you, or ever treated you like you think you should be treated, that should be enough.

I’d like to challenge you to see the good, as we did. Of course there are hypocrites, those who don’t live this faith as it should be, but you don’t know why, and it doesn’t matter anyway. I heard it said that a hummingbird seeks life and a buzzard seeks death. And they both

find what they seek. In every parish there are those to whom you can point and say “that’s what it should look like!” Fix your eyes on them.

And your Abouna. We quickly learned that probably because of 2,000 years of tending to persecuted sheep the Coptic priests are among the best in the world. Seek them out. Ask them for guidance. Listen to them and do as they say. Even if they make a mistake, the blessing from God will be yours simply because of the humility of obedience.

Our Abouna taught us, baptized us, chrismated us, married us in the church, gave us our first communion on Easter, taught my son, baptized, chrismated and communed him, did the same for our dear friend, engaged he and she to one another, and God willing will marry them. He is our friend, adviser, mentor, guide and beloved father. And to see his gentle smile when he prays over us the absolution is to see Christ. Nothing in the world (and I’ve taken more of what the world has to offer than I care to admit) can equal his role in our lives and salvation. Your Abouna can be the same for you if you only seek it with sincerity and diligence.

Have compassion for your elders. You’ll never know the things they went through. But this you do know: they are among the 10% of all Egypt who kept the faith — who carried it on — who suffered for it. And if they err, or if there is something you see that should be changed, ask yourself “What am I doing with what I have? They did this under suffering, but what shall I do with my freedom? I have access to knowledge they never dreamed possible. I have nobody persecuting me. How can I do as much with this as they did with their circumstance?”

What excuse will we have before the Judgment Seat of Christ? Shall we stand next to the woman with the issue of blood who fought through the crowds, being unclean, to touch the hem of His garment and say “Well, I abandoned the faith because someone was mean to me.”? Shall we stand next to Blind Bartimaeus whom they could not silence, but shouted even louder “Have mercy on me!” and say “I let you pass by because someone didn’t treat me as I thought they should.”? Shall we stand among the countless martyrs whose lives were demanded because of their faithfulness to the church and say “I left the church, but I still kept my faith.”? Shall we stand before our King who was crucified and say “It was too hard.”?

If we see something lacking, it is for us to add it, not to abandon the very place we believe needs it. It is for you, the young, to add what this new land needs to be able to experience the unique beauty of the Coptic Church — not to criticize the elders who have run their race, and kept the faith. It is for you to keep and preserve the spirit of humility, deep and quiet faith, silent suffering, and simple hope that has been at the heart of the Coptic Church for millennia.

You have been handed a baton in a race. It is covered with the blood of Christ, the Apostles, the martyrs, and your ancestors. God forbid you should throw it in the dirt and leave

the race! Carry it, preserve the good, change in yourselves the things that may not be perfect, and add to it what is needed in this place. And in time, you too will pass it on.

*“ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2*

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