

Establishment of Sunday School

Objectives

To learn about the establishment of Sunday School in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

References

1. "Archdeacon Habib Guirguis" by Michael Gibrael (Published by Sunday School Central- Sydney, Australia)
2. "The Church after the Council of Chalcedon" by the late H.G. Bishop Youannis

Scriptural Verse

"Whoever does and teaches them (the commandments), he shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven" (**Matthew 5:19**)

Lesson Guidelines

Western backed Protestant missions flourished in Egypt during the years of British colonization. These missions were aggressive in proselytizing to the Copts resulting in the weakening of the Coptic Church.

Revival of the Church

- ✠ Pope Kyrillos the Fourth, father of Reform, started the revival by building Coptic Schools where religion would be taught.
- ✠ Pope Kyrillos the Fifth started the actual reform by building the theological school for the priests. Its mission was to produce educated and enlightened priests who were able to serve with a zealous Spirit.
- ✠ Pope Kyrillos chose a great young man in the life of the church "Archdeacon Habib Guirguis" to help him in his mission.
- ✠ Habib Guirguis was very zealous and religious. He was one of the first twelve students to graduate from the school and then became its principal for 33 years.
- ✠ Habib Guirguis dedicated his life to the service of the church. He refused to marry in order to dedicate his time and talents to the service.
- ✠ He worked very hard to educate the Copts about the importance of preserving the Orthodox faith and to find capable and enlightened priests to nurture it.

History of Sunday School

- ✠ In 1890: at the age of 24, he started to teach the public school children who were not receiving any religious education in the halls of the Coptic schools and in some Cairo churches.
- ✠ He adopted various ideas from the foreign missions that were undermining the church such as giving pictures, gifts, and songs in Sunday Schools as well as holding afternoon meetings for adults. He also encouraged hymns in the meetings and individual prayers in groups in a Coptic Orthodox fashion.
- ✠ He wrote many precious books to enlighten the Copts about Coptic Orthodox dogmas. He published 30 volumes, a book of hymns and songs including "My Coptic Church" and he also published a magazine called El Karma (The Vine).

- ✠ In 1908, through God's blessings, he organized a central committee to set the curriculum and ascertain the continued harmony of all those who work in this fertile field.
- ✠ In 1907, he introduced Christian Education to the public schools. The government accepted under the condition that they would not fund these classes or provide any curriculum.
- ✠ In 1927, they extended education from primary to secondary schools.
- ✠ In 1909, Upon the Pope's request he dedicated his efforts to prepare a book to help leaders and servants in their missions. He published a book of three parts entitled "A Summary of the Origins of faith". The book was so successful that a fifth edition was published by 1913.
- ✠ The number of branches multiplied from the North to the far south. In 1941 a conference was held for Cairo's Sunday School servants and was attended by ~ 500 servants.
- ✠ He started a women's committee to supervise Sunday School for girls, providing them with the same curriculum of the boys.
- ✠ He founded associations to teach Orthodoxy for adults who didn't get the chance to attend Sunday school and called it "El Gamaeya El Kepteya". He prepared a curriculum with prayers for them, provided spiritual, cultural and recreational services.

Activities that spread from Sunday School

- ✠ Retreats to monasteries and churches, conferences, seminars, exhibitions, pamphlets, books and later conventions.
- ✠ Habib Guirguis's coworkers shouldered the responsibility of continuing the march of the church out of the darkness to emerge back into the Christian world as a leading light as it was in its golden age.
- ✠ Some of those servants, among them, the talented young poet and writer Nazeer Gayed (H.H. Pope Shenouda the 3rd) launched a very influential magazine in 1947 called "Sunday School Magazine". In their love for their great teacher, they put the magazine under his care. By the grace of God, the magazine is still published.

Difficulties and Obstacles Along the Way:

Many difficulties confronted Habib Guirguis on his mission to reform, but through the grace of God he was able to overcome them. These include:

- ✠ The western mission that gradually increased in number and was backed by the Colonial power convincing the Moslem Government to allow Christian teachings in schools.
- ✠ Convincing Christian teachers to teach without any wages required lots of work.
- ✠ Starting a service without a curriculum was impossible.
- ✠ The Sunday School program was opposed by some church authorities who made it difficult for the servants to serve in a healthy climate of love.

Conclusion

Although Sunday School in the Coptic Church was established fairly recently, it has become an integral part of church life, thanks to the efforts of faithful servants such as Habib Guirguis. We are all called to serve our church with love and zeal to promote the salvation of all its members.

Activities/Discussion Points

1. Discuss the importance of Sunday School in the life of the church.
2. Compare the attitude of Habib Guirguis with that of others who have felt that reform was needed in the church, e.g. Martin Luther.