

The Theological school of Alexandria

Objectives

To learn about the history of the School of Alexandria and its impact in the Christian Life

References

- ❖ “The Theological School at Alexandria” by Father Matthew Attia

Scriptural Verse

- ❖ “Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst” (Isaiah 19:1-3)

Lesson Outlines

The School of Alexandria

- ❖ Founded by Ptolemy Soter in 323 BC. He initiated the effort of translating other culture’s works into Greek. This process began with the translation of the Septuagint (72 rabbis/scribes), the OT, into Greek.
- ❖ Became source of attraction for many Greek philosophers by Ptolemy Philadelphus who was eager to convert Egyptian culture into Greek.
- ❖ The Egyptians were too proud of their culture and civilization to be converted but they did continue to study Greek culture.
- ❖ The number of rolls or “books” is estimated to have been numbered between 400,000 and 700,000.
- ❖ In the School of Alexandria, Egyptian pagan priests, Jewish rabbis, Magi from Persia, Brahmins and Buddhist monks, met in an atmosphere of inclusiveness and mutual respect. Thus Alexandria, which was a cosmopolitan city, was a unique center of a brilliant intellectual life.
- ❖ St. Jerome records that the Theological School was founded by St. Mark himself.
- ❖ He was inspired by the Holy Spirit to establish it to teach Christianity and “legitimize” the religion in the city that was so intellectual.
- ❖ It is considered the first school to teach Theology, Biblical studies and interpretation.
- ❖ In the beginning, it was predominately for catechumens regardless of religion, nationality, gender, age, culture or education.
- ❖ By the second century, the school became quite influential for many reasons.
- ❖ It satisfied the Alexandrian thirst for religious knowledge and encouraged higher studies thus creating research work in a variety of fields.
- ❖ Through its missionary zeal, the School was able to win many souls to Christianity from Egypt and abroad.

- ❖ It attracted many students from other nations; many of whom became leaders and bishops in their own churches.
- ❖ It used philosophy as a weapon in dealing with pagan philosophers, thus defeating them at their own game.
- ❖ Its teaching was encyclopedic; first presenting the whole series of secular sciences, and then rising to moral and religious philosophy and finally Christian theology.
- ❖ Those attending the school, actually put into practice all they were taught. Teachers and students observed prayer, fasting and diverse exercises of asceticism. In purity and integrity, therefore, their lives were exemplary.

A quick glimpse of the names of deans provides further evidence of the school's influence on Christendom:

- ❖ Justus
- ❖ Eumenius
- ❖ Marcianus
- ❖ Pantaenus :
 - Introduced philosophy and sciences into the school to attract educated pagans.
 - Developed Coptic Language by using Greek letters in addition to seven Hieroglyphic letters.
 - Translated Holy Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Coptic (190 AD) with the help of Clement and Origen
- ❖ Clement of Alexandria (150~213)
 - Considered the Father of Christian Philosophy
 - First person to use the fish as sign for Christianity
 - First to muster the evidence for Christianity from all Greek cultural sources and all the speculations of heretics.
- ❖ Origen (185-245)
 - Wrote around 6000 books—outstanding teacher and scholar
 - Created six-fold Bible: arranged in six parallel columns from Hebrew and Greek texts
 - Wrote commentary on entire Bible
 - The Coptic Church was compelled to excommunicate him because of some faulty ideas, i.e. salvation of devil, universal salvation and the way in which he accepted priesthood
- ❖ Heracles
- ❖ Dionysius
- ❖ Theognostus
- ❖ Pierius
- ❖ Archillas
- ❖ Peter
- ❖ Serapion

- ❖ Macarius
- ❖ Didymus the Blind (313-395)
 - Lost sight at age 4, therefore, never learned to read in school.
 - Through his eagerness for education, he invented the engraved writing for reading with his finger—1500 years before Braille reinvented it.
 - Learned entire Bible and Church doctrines by heart.
 - Skilled in rhetoric, philosophy, logic, math and music
- ❖ Rodon

After Didymus, an obscure period in the history of the school followed and its greatest days were over.

- ❖ After the first split of the Church at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, Emperor Theodosius closed the School in an attack on the Copts.
- ❖ The Moslem Caliph “Omar of Damascus” finally destroyed what remained of the library because:”They will either contradict the Qoran, in which case, they are heresy or agree, so are superfluous.”
- ❖ Nothing, however, can be taken away from the wealth of teaching and scholarship that the School of Alexandria offered the early Church.
- ❖ In the 19th century, Pope Kyrillos (Cyril) IV began an educational reformation for the Coptic Church.
- ❖ He began by reviving the Coptic language, which had been mostly lost and only used in monasteries.
- ❖ He devoted his efforts to disciplining the youth and educating them.
- ❖ His goal was to reestablish a theological school similar to the famous one but he died before fulfilling his dream.
- ❖ Pope Kyrillos V respected this idea and indeed opened the school in Nov. 1893.
- ❖ It was headed by its dean Yousif Macarius, followed by Archdeacon Habib Girgis who published *El Karma* periodical to spread the facts of the faith in a positive way.
- ❖ In 1912, it was moved to Cairo, where approximately 400 students were enrolled.
- ❖ Pope Kyrillos VI immediately after his ordination, named the school as the Theological Seminary of Pope Kyrillos to commemorate 100 years since the departure of Pope Kyrillos IV.
- ❖ In 1962, he also ordained a bishop of Education (currently HH Pope Shenouda III) to be responsible for the Theological Seminary and the Ecclesiastical Teaching.
- ❖ This seminary today has many branches in Egypt as well as in America, Canada, Australia, and the UK. In conjunction with this, the “Sunday School movement” was solidified.

Conclusion

The School of Alexandria was one of the most important sources of theological knowledge of Christianity. It became a center for evangelism and theological research. Although it does not exist today in its original form, the teachings and practices of the School are very much alive in the modern mind of the Coptic Church and its leaders.

Activities / Discussion Points

Note that most of the Christians, who are not enrolled in the Theological school, are very educated theologically and are really aware of their Dogmas. How the theological sciences of the Theological school of Alexandria did reach the Christian people? Through the following:

- ❖ Bishop of Education, HH Pope Shenouda III with all his sermons and books.
- ❖ All the faithful people who studied theology and are teaching us through sermons and books.
- ❖ The Sunday School activities all over the See of Alexandria.
- ❖ The Christian Channels with all their teaching programs.
- ❖ The faithfulness of the Christian people who are eager to know their religion.