



By the prayers of the first holy fathers: A delegation of monastics from the Russian Orthodox Church visits the holy sites of Egypt



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Fifty-five years ago, on July 25, 1968, a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church headed by Archbishop Anthony (Melnikov) of Minsk and Byelorussia took part in the celebrations of the Coptic Church marking the 1900th anniversary of the martyrdom of the Apostle and Evangelist Mark and the consecration of the Cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo. His Holiness Patriarch Alexy I, in a message to Coptic Patriarch Cyril VI, noted at the time: "We hope for the strengthening of mutual ties between our Churches in the future." The words of His Holiness proved to be prophetic: since that time, the relations between the Russian and Coptic Churches have been successfully developing.

In late April – early May 2023, another delegation of monastics from the Russian Orthodox Church visited Egypt. This is far from the first such visit within the framework of the activities of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church: both sides are actively exchanging experiences of monastic life. Russian monks visit monasteries in the Theban and Nitrian deserts, where monasticism originated, and Coptic monks visit the monasteries of St. Sergius and his disciples, in the Vologda region, in Veliky Novgorod, and in the Russian North.

This time, the Russian delegation was headed by the Administrator of the Moscow Patriarchate, First Vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', Abbot of the Moscow Novospassky Stavropegial Monastery, Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk. The delegation included Bishop Arseny of Yuryev, Vicar of the Novgorod Diocese; Deputy Chairman of the Synodal Department for Monasteries and Monasticism, Abbess Juliana (Kaleda) of the Moscow Zachatyevsky Convent; Secretary of the Department for External Church Relations for Inter-Christian Relations, Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov); Abbot of the Antonievo-Leokhnovsky Hermitage, Dean of the Monasteries of the Novgorod Diocese, Archimandrite Mitrofan (Pismensky); Abbot of the Dormition Staritsky Monastery, Hegumen Damascene (Leonov); Rector of the Bishop's Metochion – the Church of the Presentation of the Theotokos of the Kalyazin Monastery, Hieromonk Ambrose (Zhelyabovsky); and residents of the Novospassky, Valaam, Danilov, and Zachatyevsky monasteries.

The Coptic Church is one of the Ancient Oriental Churches, tracing its origin to the Apostle and Evangelist Mark. The Copts are descendants of the ancient Egyptians. This Church includes numerous Egyptian saints, martyrs, monks, and bishops. In the 5th century, after the Fourth Ecumenical Council, a tragic division occurred between the Christians of Egypt, Syria, and Armenia on the one hand, and the Orthodox Churches of the Roman Empire on the other, due to theological disagreements. Today in Egypt, Christians play a significant role, with approximately 15–20 percent of the country's inhabitants identifying as such.

Upon arriving in Egypt, the delegation of monastics headed by Metropolitan Dionysius met with the Primate of the Coptic Church, His Holiness Patriarch Tawadros II, on April 29. He has been leading the Coptic Church since 2012. He was elected Patriarch by lot. He was consecrated as a bishop in 1997. Prior to that, he was a monk at the monastery of St. Paisius the Great.

Patriarch Tawadros warmly welcomed the guests, spoke about the Coptic Church, and highly appreciated the work of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church:

"I consider the work of the Commission for Dialogue between our Churches to be very important, as it carries out promising and mutually enriching cooperation for the glory of God. The communication

between our monastics is particularly significant, because it is primarily through their witness that the ancient living tradition of faith is preserved. And that is why we are so joyful that today you, our Russian brothers and sisters in Christ, are visiting the ancient Egyptian monasteries. The history of many of them dates back to the 4th century – the time of the earthly life of the founders of Christian monasticism."

On April 30 and May 1, the pilgrims visited the largest monasteries of Christian Egypt, the most ancient monastic abodes in the Eastern Desert near the Red Sea – those of St. Anthony the Great and St. Paul of Thebes. It was there that these great fathers, the founders of monasticism, labored. On the sites of their ascetic struggles, two thriving monasteries now stand, preserving the traditions of ancient monasticism.

In the mountains near the Lavra of St. Anthony, there is a cave where the Saint labored. This is one of the most famous and revered places. For more than seventy years, the first Christian monk, St. Anthony, prayed there in solitude and struggled with his passions. A staircase of more than a thousand steps leads to the cave; midway along the path is the church of St. Paul the Simple. A narrow passage leads inside. In the cave, a small Altar table made of stone has been constructed, upon which the Liturgy is celebrated daily early in the morning. The pilgrims from Russia performed a moleben (prayer service) in this holy place.

The Lavra of St. Anthony the Great is the oldest Christian monastery. Unlike a traditional cenobitic monastery, the community built by Anthony's disciples was a lavra in the literal sense. The monks lived in scattered cells as hermits, and on Sundays they gathered for worship in a common church. Nowadays, the cenobitic rule predominates in the monastery. The monastery has five churches, gardens, a mill, a bakery, and a large library. Many patriarchs, metropolitans, and bishops of the Coptic Church began their path in the Church right here. Today, more than a hundred monks labor here; all of them are well-educated intellectuals, having both theological and secular education – such are the criteria for entering Egyptian monasteries today. More than a million pilgrims arrive here annually.

In one of the monastery's churches, Metropolitan Dionysius celebrated the Divine Liturgy. Then, a tour of the monastery was conducted for the guests, and a fraternal conversation with the residents of the lavra took place.

The monastery of St. Paul of Thebes is located not far from the Lavra of Saint Anthony. It was founded on the site of the ascetic struggles and burial of the remarkable predecessor of St. Anthony, who left accounts of him. St. Anthony spoke of his meeting with Paul of Thebes, of the miraculous feeding with bread brought to them by a raven, and of the burial of Paul, when two lions dug a grave for him so that Anthony could bury him.

The members of the delegation venerated the tomb of St. Paul of Thebes and the relics of the monastery, viewed the ancient mill, the old refectory, the monastery museum, and the spring of St. Paul, from which, according to tradition, he drew water during the years of his ascetic struggle. As part of the exchange of monastic experience, the guests held a conversation with the brethren of the monastery regarding monastic traditions.

"Amazing facts capture the imagination," says Hegumen Damascene (Leonov), Abbot of the Dormition Staritsky Monastery. "There are about 50 active monasteries in the land of Egypt, and about 30 of them have more than 100 residents. Despite the fact that in Egypt, persecutions and acts of aggression against Christians have flared up from time to time over many centuries, the monasteries maintain the continuity of traditions laid down by their founders. In communicating with the brothers and sisters, we felt a special kindness and hospitality. Their simplicity, modesty, and joyful state of spirit are striking. This impressed us very much."

On May 2 and 3, the delegation visited the Christian monasteries of the Nitrian Desert: those of the renowned theologian and ascetic St. Macarius the Great, of the Romans, of the Syrians, and of St. Paisius the Great.

The monastery of St. Macarius was founded in the 4th century by Saint Macarius, the son of a village priest and a camel driver. Other monks began to settle around his cell, and then the first church appeared. By the 6th century, despite regular raids by Berbers, the monastery was one of the largest monastic communities in Egypt. In the middle of the century, the residence of the Coptic Patriarchs moved here. Over time, monastic life began to decline, but it was from this monastery that the largest number of primates of the Coptic Church came – twenty-nine. The revival of the monastery began in 1969 thanks to the efforts of Coptic Patriarch Cyril VI. During excavations, arks containing particles of the relics of the Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord John, and the Prophet Elisha were found. Today, the monastery community numbers about 150 monks who pray and work together. Hermits still live in caves beyond the ancient monastery wall.

The monastery was later inhabited by renowned ascetics: St. Arsenius the Great, St. Macarius of Alexandria, St. John Kolobos, St. Poemen the Great, and others. The stories of many are known to us as well. For example, Venerable John Kolobos was the author of the Life of St. Paisius the Great, in which he first told the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

One of the true treasures of the monastery is its invaluable library. It houses ancient copies of biblical books in various languages, commentaries by the Church Fathers, apocryphal books, lives of saints, theological works, and liturgical texts. Not long ago, in 2021, a previously unknown text of the final dialogue of Macarius the Great was found in the library. The translation was carried out by the

Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church and published on the official website of the Department for External Church Relations. In the text of the Dialogue, the Saint gave instructions on the topic of pious Christian life:

"My children, flee from sin and be patient until death, keeping the commandments of the Lord. Do not accept the prompting of the enemy [of the human race], who incites you to violate the will of God, no matter how small a commandment may seem. For the violation of any of them provokes the wrath of God."

The Monastery of the Romans (al-Baramus) was founded around the year 335 by Saint Macarius the Great. It was given this name because two Romans, the sons of the Roman Emperor Valentinian I, Maximus and Domitius, labored as ascetics here in a cell during Macarius's time. The relics of the holy inhabitants of the monastery are kept here – those of St. Isidore of Pelusium and St. Moses the Black. St. Arsenius the Great also performed his ascetic feats here; he is known for the fact that, despite being recognized as a saint by the monks, he, feeling the approach of death, wept, fearing the abundance of his sins. In the main church of the monastery, a column is preserved by which he prayed during the years of his asceticism here.

The Syrian Monastery (as-Surian) appeared on the site where the cell of Venerable Paisius the Great once stood. For a long time, people from Syria lived there, hence the name. Venerable Ephrem the Syrian also came here; it was here that he met Venerable Paisius the Great: in front of the cell, he stuck his staff into the ground, from which a tree grew that still bears fruit to this day. The monastery currently has about 250 inhabitants, and many hermits preserve the ancient tradition.

The Monastery of St. Paisius the Great appeared in the Nitrian Desert at the end of the 4th century. St. Paisius was its founder and abbot, and his relics reside here. Their incorruption is associated with a special event in the saint's life. Once, the Lord told Paisius that He would appear to him on a mountain. People who heard about this ran to the indicated place, and Saint Paisius went with them. On the way, they met an old man who could not walk and asked the passersby to help him. But no one responded; only Paisius stopped and carried him on his shoulders. On the way, he felt that it was becoming easier and easier for him, and then the old man disappeared. This was the Lord, who appeared to the Saint one and said: "since you carried Me on your shoulders, I will preserve your body incorrupt".

The Monastery of Saint Paisius plays an important role in the life of the Coptic Church. Many hierarchs have come from here, including the current Primate of the Coptic Church, His Holiness Patriarch Tawadros II. His predecessor, His Holiness Patriarch Shenouda III, whose name is associated with the development of the Coptic Church in the 20th century, is also buried here.

Upon returning from the Nitrian Desert to Cairo, the pilgrims visited the church of the Great Martyr Menas, which, by the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Tawadros II, has been transferred for the use of the Moscow Patriarchate. Metropolitan Dionysius and the trip participants performed a moleben (prayer service) there.

"The Russian community in Egypt is small but very close-knit," notes Archpriest Alexy Mashkov, rector of the Russian Church parishes in Egypt. "We have several communities in the Arab Republic of Egypt: in Cairo, in Hurghada, and communities are being organized in Alexandria and at the under-construction nuclear power plant in the city of El Dabaa, where Russian specialists work. The communities in Cairo and Hurghada were formed in the late 1990s – early 2000s, mainly consisting of citizens who moved from countries of the former USSR. Also, for the needs of the community in Cairo, the Coptic Church transferred the church of the Great Martyr Menas in the Gardens of the Pyramids in 2022. Thanks to this, we have essentially acquired a representation of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Coptic Patriarch, which allows us to resolve arising issues more effectively."

Christianity in Egypt is one of the indigenous religions of this country. Egypt became a Holy Land when the feet of the Savior step upon it, fleeing with His family from Herod the Great. Subsequently, it was here that monasticism flourished. Today, Egypt, unfortunately, is not considered an attractive destination for pilgrimage, although it should be, and it is good that delegations from our Church now regularly come here. People are discovering Christian Egypt.

The delegation participants also visited the church in Maadi: according to tradition, it was at this place that the Theotokos, Her Son, and Righteous Joseph the Betrothed escaped from the pursuers sent by Herod and crossed to the other side of the river. In this same place, many centuries earlier, the basket with the infant Moses had washed ashore.

In addition to male monasteries, the monastics of the Russian Orthodox Church also visited two female monasteries in Cairo – the monastery of the Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates and the monastery of the Great Martyr Mercurius Philopator. Female monasticism in Egypt exists under special conditions: unlike male monasteries, which are located mainly in deserts, female ones are in cities and are often surrounded by Muslim neighborhoods. This neighborhood has continued for many centuries.

"We arrived at the monastery of the Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates late, at half past one in the morning," said Abbess Juliana (Kaleda), Deputy Chairman of the Synodal Department for Monasteries and Monasticism and Abbess of the Moscow Stavropegial Zachatyevsky Convent. "We were amazed: the sisters met us with lit lamps and singing. In other female monasteries, we were received similarly, sometimes with flowers. It was an image of the wise virgins who are always ready to go out to meet the bridegroom. Their souls are wounded by such love for Christ that they are ready to be on guard for their

souls day and night and at the same time to be at work for the Lord. There is much to learn from both male and female monasteries. What we read in the Patericons, the 'Matericon,' the 'Lausiac History,' we saw all of it there in person. Saint John Chrysostom wrote about this long ago: 'At the beginning of Christianity in the land of Egypt, a wondrous army of Christ appears, leading a way of life characteristic only of the heavenly powers, and it appears not only in men but also in women, who philosophize no less than men' – and this continues to this day."

There are many who wish to enter a female monastery in Egypt, but they undergo a strict selection process. A candidate lives in the monastery for five days; she is observed for her inner disposition and aspiration. If she tries to be among the first to come to the service, to the rule, to obedience, does not shirk, does not seek ease and excuses, loves everyone and is loved by all, then, as the sisters told us, she is accepted into the monastery.

Female monasteries live according to the rule of St. Pachomius the Great. The practice of female hermitage has not existed since the Muslim conquest of Egypt, as it became dangerous. But there are recluses, as there once were with us: they remain constantly in their cells, food is brought to them, and they come out only for the Liturgy to receive communion. The history of Egyptian Christians knows many persecutions from Muslims, so all monks and nuns have the memory of death and are always ready to become martyrs for Christ.

We certainly should learn from them love for Christ and love for all; they demonstrate love for neighbor in practice. When we arrived at their monastery late at night, I thought they would accommodate us and we would go to sleep – but they set a festive table and began to treat us. In the morning, we went for breakfast; the table was filled with many lenten dishes, and the sisters said: we did not know what you would eat, so we prepared everything. Love in Christ unites us all and shows the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Without love, we cannot be saved: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35)."

Mutual exchanges of monastic experience are important and beneficial for both sides, believes Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, Administrator of the Moscow Patriarchate, First Vicar of the Holy Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', Abbot of the Novospassky Monastery, and head of the delegation:

"Egypt has a Christian history dating back to antiquity. The Apostle Mark preached here, the great hierarchs Athanasius the Great and Cyril of Alexandria carried out their ministry. It was from here that monasticism began to spread: the Holy Fathers Anthony, Macarius, Pachomius, Paisius, and Arsenius labored here. Each of them received the title 'the Great' for a reason. They gave examples of ascetic life that have enduring significance. During our journey, we were glad for the opportunity to communicate

and dialogue with representatives of the Coptic Church. Coming into contact with the testimonies of the labors of the Egyptian monks of antiquity, whose heirs and guardians are the Coptic Christians, we also shared with them our modest experience, based on the rich spiritual heritage of Russian monasticism – in the monasteries of Holy Rus', where over more than a thousand years, their own unique monastic tradition has been formed. I am confident that the exchange of spiritual experience with the Christians of Egypt will enrich both Churches."

The Coptic Church is one of the most important strategic partners of the Russian Orthodox Church. The beginning of relations between the two Churches goes back centuries. The activation of contacts occurred in the mid-19th century thanks to the activities of Archimandrite Porfiry (Uspensky). In 1902, a Coptic hierarch visited Russia for the first time.

The October Revolution interrupted the ties between the Churches. Contacts were resumed only after the Second World War, when His Holiness Patriarch Alexy I visited Egypt in 1945. Subsequently, regular exchanges of delegations took place, including at the highest level. The outstanding church hierarch Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) made an invaluable contribution to the development of bilateral relations. In 1972, His Holiness Patriarch Shenouda III visited the USSR for the first time; he came again in 1988 for the celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus'. In 1991, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II visited Egypt, and in 2010 – His Holiness Patriarch Kirill. In 2014 and 2017, the successor of Patriarch Shenouda III, His Holiness Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II, visited Moscow. Today, the dialogue between the two Churches is actively developing in many areas.

During the visit of Patriarch Tawadros II to Russia in 2014, at a meeting with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, a decision was made to establish a Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church. Among the joint projects are mutual visits of monastic delegations and pilgrimage groups, bilateral theological consultations, academic interaction between leading Russian and Coptic theological schools, contacts in the media sphere, exchange of experience among specialists in the field of church social service, coordination of interaction to provide support to suffering Christians in a number of regions of the world, and coordination of interaction in the field of protecting traditional moral values.

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