



*The Church of St. Bishoi in the Monastery of St. Bishoi in the Wadi al-Natrun*

## On the Trail of Ancient Christians in Egypt

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In late December 2010, during the Twelve Days of Christmas, 25 lifelong learners participated in a Down Ancient Paths travel study venture to Egypt where Pharaohs, pyramids, temples and mosques have long dominated tourist itineraries. In recent decades, however, the more hidden Coptic Christian tradition which hails Mark the Evangelist as its founder, has begun to attract the attention of western travelers. Egypt, in fact, claims a prized, though small, share of the Holy Land as the temporary exilic home of the Holy Family after its post-Nativity flight, briefly mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew (2:16) but embellished in an apocryphal wealth of Coptic stories and legends. Twenty two places are associated with the Holy Family. The precise length of their exile is debated.

Accompanied by local security personnel, we abandoned the well traveled, tourist track to follow the route of the Holy Family through the Nile Delta where pre-modern, labour intensive, peasant life still goes on as it has for millennia. The site of Tell Basta, once a centre for the orgiastic veneration of the cat goddess, Bastet, is now a field chaotically strewn with hieroglyphed stones. The Coptic version of what happened here tells of a dramatic power encounter between the Holy Family and the enshrined Egyptian deities. Mary entered a local temple with the Christ Child in her arms causing the granite statues to collapse and shatter in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 19:1. We continued to Mosterod where a desperate Holy Family, hounded by Herod's soldiers, may have sought sanctuary in a cave. Night had fallen by the time we arrived at Ma'adi on the banks of the Nile south of Cairo, where Jesus and his parents may have embarked by boat to Upper Egypt.

The flat stoned passageways of Old Cairo, once Roman Babylon, took us through a police-controlled, Christian enclave in the heart of Egypt's capital. The renovated Coptic Museum reinforces the Copts' vibrant sense of their own antiquity. Cairo is nicknamed "the city of a thousand minarets," however in this confined district of the city, richly iconographed churches dating to the 5th century control the sacred space. Their histories are interwoven with the trans-generational memories of saints, martyrs and the extraordinary feats of male and female religious heroes.

Beyond Cairo, in the great deserts of Egypt, we engaged an invigorated, monastic spirituality with roots back to the 3rd century. At the females-only Convent of Al Azab in the Fayoum Oasis, Sr. Irene, a theologically astute nun-physician with cell phone in hand, evinced a radiant

fortitude. She spoke passionately of the necessity of a "psychological martyrdom" which prepares one to make whatever sacrifice necessary for the sake of being "a Christian." The integrity of her heart was evident in the pure, inescapable gaze of her eyes. More desert conversations followed. On Coptic Christmas Day (January 7) at the massive, fortress-styled Monastery of St Macarius in the Wadi Natrun, Fr. Mercurios, an architect by training, introduced us to the history of the desert fathers and spoke intimately of Christ's companionship in difficult life crises. His presence exuded the tranquil joy which emanates from a life of ceaseless prayer.

Martyrdom is never far from the minds of Coptic Christians. Their calendar is known as the "Era of the Martyrs" which begins in 284 CE when Diocletian became emperor and subsequently unleashed a bloody, ten year "Great Persecution" on the church. Later would come centuries of Islamic occupation. On Christmas night, before leaving the desert, we visited illumined, fresh graves inside the Monastery of St. Menas (named after an ancient martyr) to pay our respects to the "Alexandria Martyrs" killed recently in the New Year's eve bombing of a Coptic church. Present day Copts, who bear crosses tattooed on their wrists, are no strangers to the high price their faith has historically exacted of their ancestors. **■**

## Down Ancient Paths Scholarship Fund

Down Ancient Paths is a government award-winning Christian Studies travel study program at Ambrose University College. Since its inception, it has enabled participants to probe the historical and spiritual depths of the global Christian heritage by offering customized, educational travel ventures which explore both the oldest Christian traditions in the world and the biblical landscapes of the Middle East.

Hundreds of travellers, both Ambrose students and lifelong learners from the wider public, have taken part in these reasonably priced, professionally serviced, life transforming, educational experiences. Many have testified as to how they have benefited from travelling Down Ancient Paths.

Three years ago the Down Ancient Paths Scholarship Fund was established to assist deserving students with some of the travel expenses associated with such travel study experiences. These scholarships average \$850 CAN and are awarded to eligible, participating students.

Several generous donors have already contributed to the fund which has made the annual awarding of these scholarships possible. The month-long Summer School in the Holy Land/2012 is the next Down Ancient Paths venture with a specific focus for Ambrose students. Already, many have expressed serious interest in participating. Please consider a tax-receiptable gift to help give Ambrose students this great experience.

Thank you for giving your consideration to this invitation to invest in students' futures at a time when the consciousness of the Christian heritage is slipping away in most Western countries, including our own.

To donate to the Down Ancient Paths Scholarship Fund contact:  
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