

The See of St Mark and its Contribution to the Universal Church

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WHAT a blessed privilege it is for a humble pilgrim coming from one of the ancient outposts of eastern Christianity to greet the Church of Alexandria and the see of St Mark, to which the Universal Church owes such a great debt! May I join you, along with my people of the Syrian Orthodox Church in India, in giving thanks for the witness of the apostle Mark whose blood watered the roots of this Church. May his prayers bring peace to the people of the United Arab Republic; may his intercession bring, by the mercy of God, prosperity and plenty to this country.

Christianity is not a western religion. It is Asian-African to its very bone, though universal in its scope. It is this Asian-African Christianity that the see of St Mark symbolizes for me. Almost all the great Fathers of the ancient Church, including Jesus Christ and the apostles, as well as the patriarchs of the Old Testament, were Asians and Africans. St Mark, probably an African by birth, grew up in Jerusalem in Asia, and preached the Gospel both in the West and in Africa.

The Universal Church owes so much to this great evangelist and to the see of Alexandria. In a sense, the three great things which constitute the heart of the Christian faith and tradition we owe to John Mark and his see in Alexandria.

What are these three things?

1. The Apostolic Faith

First, the Apostolic Tradition based on the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I do not know whether St Mark's Gospel was written before that of St Matthew or not. Some of my western friends believe so, based on their own very clever conjectures. The evidence adduced to show that Mark's Gospel was written before that of Matthew is not sufficient to override the

evidence of the universal tradition that St Matthew was the first to write a Gospel.

Be that as it may, St Mark, 'the beloved son' of St Peter and St Paul, chief among the apostles, brings together in his brief Gospel the heart of the good news as preached by the apostle to the Jews and the apostle to the Gentiles. It was this faith which St Mark planted on the fertile soil of the believing people of Egypt, which later flourished in the great catechetical school of Alexandria. In the two great crises of the faith of the Church produced by the great perennial heresies of Christian history, the denial of the trinitarian faith and the inability to hold together the human and divine aspects of the Lord's Person, it was the Egyptian Church which supplied the defenders of the apostolic faith. Arianism against which the great Athanasius fought almost single-handed perpetually re-emerges in the Church, whenever an unsophisticated monotheism, combined with a relentless Aristotelian logic of non-identity, sweeps and sways theological reflection into denying the great mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is at the heart of the Christian faith. The trinitarian doctrine, as against any Christo-monism, enables the Church to go beyond any simple monism or dualism, beyond the individualism of Kierkegaard and the I—Thou of Martin Buber, to live in the richness of community, the identity of the non-identical, or the unity of the diverse. I say that in quick theological shorthand, because I have not the time to dwell upon the practical consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity for the life of man on earth. On this point of utmost importance Athanasius of Alexandria showed the way for the Universal Church.

Equally important is the struggle of Cyril of Alexandria, three generations later; against the ingenuous notion of a gap

between the human and divine natures of Christ such as Nestorius of Constantinople was tempted to suggest. This conception of an unbridgeable gap between man and God makes the fact of the Incarnation impossible. And yet the temptation to separate man and God has always beset some in certain schools of theology, even in our own generation. God became by nature. Man that man may become by grace. God' This is the heart of the Incarnation; again a truth transcending any simple Aristotelian logic of nonidentity, such as many still follow.

The Universal Church thus owes to the teaching of the apostles Peter and Paul, as established in Alexandria by St Mark and as clearly formulated by St Athanasius and St Cyril, the two cardinal points of the Christian faith, the worship of the Holy Trinity and the mystery of God becoming Man in order that man may become God.

2. The Transcendent Spirituality of the Christian Church

The second most important contribution of the see of St Mark is the transcendent character of Christian spirituality. Today we are finding many Christian intellectuals tempted to adopt a purely secular understanding of the Gospel, a real temptation which has begun to assail even many Roman Catholic thinkers. The heart of this temptation is to understand the Gospel in terms of 'this world alone and no other'. Unjustifiably invoking the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this way of theological thinking tries to domesticate the Gospel within the categories of history. The same temptation was present in the Byzantium of Constantine and the Christian emperors. Men like Eusebius of Caesarea regarded the Byzantine Empire as the kingdom of God upon earth and were tempted to settle down in a comfortable this-worldly Christianity. It was the monastic movement associated with the names of St Antony and St Pachomius that rose up in protest against that easy domestication of the Gospel. By their contempt for the glories and comforts of this world, they continued the witness of the martyrs, and they bore testimony to the transient character of this world and the abiding character of the kingdom that transcends and transforms history.

Today we live in an age in which absolute commitments are sneered at, in which Christianity is accommodated too easily to the desire of modern man to escape all scandal and suffering, to fit the Gospel to the needs of economic and technological development and to make all belief and all values functional and relative to the desire of affluence and comfort.

In this age of secularization it may not be the proper Christian response to revive the monasticism of the Desert Fathers. But the need for a radical witness to Jesus and his kingdom has to find a radically new form of monastic community of work worship and study, devoted to the service of mankind as a whole. The peculiar genius of monasticism was its radical witness to a kingdom that transcends history. It was Alexandria that developed that radical form of witness in a period when persecutions ceased and martyrdom was a thing of the past. Right from the 4th century the monastic movement was also the missionary movement of the Church. Even such distant lands as Ireland and the canton of Zurich in Switzerland owe their Christianity to Coptic monks. It is this monastic heritage which is the highlight of Christian spirituality in the Universal Church. All the great Fathers of the Church and most of the great missionaries from the 4th to the 16th centuries were monks. Martin Luther, who revolted against the evils of a corrupt monasticism, was himself a monk. I have no doubt that the great renewal of the Universal Church, without which there can be no visible Church unity, is awaiting a great monastic revival. I am grateful to the see of Alexandria for having contributed this transcendent spirituality to the Universal Church.

3. The Worship of the Church

I mention this last, but not because it is the least important of the three. We live in a time in which people are forgetting what it means to worship. The curtain that appears to have dropped between the unseen world and the world open directly to our senses, seems dark and heavy. When people think in terms only of what one can get out of something, it is not surprising that prayers lose their power, for prayer is not a way of manipulating the universe. Worship

means listening to the good news of the Gospel with faith, surrendering ourselves as already sacrificed by Jesus Christ on the Cross, thus being united with this eternal self-offering and being refreshed by being given the Body and blood of our Lord. This worship of the Church is the great mystery of its very life. And it is this worship that took shape in Eucharist, long before the New Testament took shape.

But where did the Eucharist begin? On the Cross of Christ one might say. But it actually began the day before, when the Lord, on the night in which he was to be betrayed, took bread, blessed it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take eat, this is my body", and likewise with the cup. Where did that event take place? Most probably in the house of John Mark. We know certainly that the house of Mark was the place where the Jerusalem Church assembled regularly for its prayer and worship. What is more reasonable than to suppose that it was there that they prepared the upper room, and that the Eucharist of the Church took shape in the life of the infant Church of Jerusalem?

So, in a sense, the Universal Church owes the heart of its faith, the most solemn mystery of its life, to the house of John Mark.

**An Address delivered at the Celebrations of the XIXth Centenary of the
Martyrdom of St Mark Alexandria.**

Here, then, are three gifts for which the Universal Church is in perpetual debt to St Mark and the see of Alexandria. First among the primatial sees of the Oriental Orthodox Church today, she has bequeathed to the Universal Church the three greatest gifts; faithfulness to the Apostolic Tradition, a transcendent spirituality, and the eucharistic worship of the Church.

The Coptic Church has every reason to be thankful that God has used her in the past in his way to bless the Universal Church. But none of us can live wholly in the past. Today these three elements need to be revitalized and made operative again in our contemporary situation.

When the Coptic Church develops afresh its intellectual heritage in a way relevant to these times, when she revives her monastic heritage in a form related to the problems of the modern world, when the Eucharist once again assumes a central role in the life of each parish with the full participation of all its members, then we may hope that the Coptic Church, which in the ancient past brought the light of the Gospel to many lands, will once again beacon light to a humanity lost in the darkness of unbelief and evil. May God grant her that privilege.

