

## St Habib Girgis and his use of Religious Education at Home and in Liturgical Worship

The practice of worship and liturgy in the daily life of Coptic Christians in Egypt through individual and communal forms of prayer, reading, chanting, and singing had suffered by the late 18th and early 20th centuries due to several factors. Not only this but, other forms of devotion such as images or particularly icons and a proper understanding of their purpose was lacking.

Some of the factors that affected the various types of worship among the Copts were the high illiteracy rate, uneducated clergy, internal struggles within the Church and the arrival of Western missionaries who attempted to proselytize among the Christians of Egypt as well as certain obstacles that the Church faced from government authorities. The Church may not have survived in its present resurrected state if it were not for the scholarly work and inspired leadership and vision of a single archdeacon.

This paper examines the vision of Saint Habib Girgis to raise the awareness of Copts at all levels, whether children, youth, families as well as seminarians and even simple villagers in remote regions of the centrality of worship, whether in their homes or in communal gatherings such as in the liturgical rites of the Church. Girgis sought to drag his church—sometimes protesting, sometimes acquiescing and somewhat hesitant—into the twentieth century through educational and structural reform and worship was critical to whether he would succeed in his mission.

Worship and particularly liturgical worship featured prominently in Girgis' educational reform. In fact, he wrote two books on this subject, one was directed towards adults and a simplified version towards the children of Sunday School. As part of his educational reform, Habib Girgis also emphasized the teaching of Coptic language as part of worship as a means of maintaining Coptic identity. Liturgical books included a transliteration of the Coptic as well as a translation into Arabic to better serve the faithful.

Thousands of villagers lived under dire circumstances and severe poverty in remote regions of Egypt and particularly in the South of Egypt where illiteracy was much higher than in major cities. However, Girgis did not neglect this important segment of the Christian population. There were no churches in the villages during those early years of Girgis' tenure as an educator and dean of the seminary. However,

he encouraged the priests of the nearby cities to visit such remote villages and take the Holy Altar-Board and to celebrate liturgies for the local villagers. Obviously the purpose of such celebrations was to familiarize the villagers with liturgical worship and to unite them with Christ through partaking of the sacrament in the Eucharist. So the liturgy became a vehicle of popular education for Girgis since liturgy engaged all the five senses.

Girgis also gave great attention to building a church on the campus grounds of the Theological College, and integrating subjects into the curriculum that would enhance the students' knowledge of the liturgy and its deep theological teachings. Girgis wanted his students to practice liturgical life as an important part of their formation process.

Moreover, Girgis used several forms of popular education as part of his educational philosophy. For instance, he placed great importance on the use of religious pictures or icons. Learning hymns was also part of Girgis' educational vision to impart fundamental religious truths to the young. As a poet, Girgis authored several hymnals for Sunday School children, as well as for use in spiritual gatherings. Notably, he used many of the well-known ritual melodies that the faithful were accustomed to, and composed hymns to fit those same tunes.

How successful was Girgis in this mission of reviving worship in the daily life of Coptic Christians is a question for further discussion in this paper.