

COPTIC NEW YEAR



Feast of Martyrs
1722 MARTYRS – 11 SEP 2005
"EL-NAYROUZ"



The Coptic New Year Feast of Martyrs

The information in this resource booklet is a comprehensive documentation of the Coptic calendar and its history.

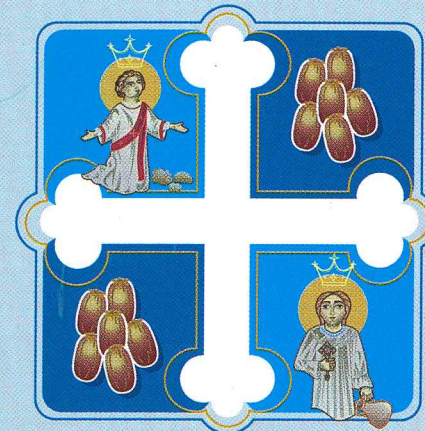
The booklet explains the establishment of the Coptic calendar going back to the time of the ancient Egyptians (4000BC), the different names used for the "El-Nayrouz" feast, old customs, rituals, traditions and historical meanings which altogether, set the foundation for the modern-day feast of the *Coptic New Year* celebrations.

Printed in Australia - September 2005

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The Coptic New Year

EL-NAYROUZ



Feast of Martyrs

1722 MARTYRS – 11 SEP 2005

(New Edition 2005)

by
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INTRODUCTION



Very Rev. Fr. Tadros El-Bakhoumi.

Dear reader, I welcome you to the 1722 celebration of the Coptic New Year, "El Nayrouz" Feast and the 2005 Festival.

Welcome to the Coptic Orthodox Church as you come to share with us one of our oldest traditional and cultural feasts.

In this booklet we will attempt to introduce some information about the Coptic New Year, known as "El Nayrouz" and the "Feast of Martyrs."

This booklet briefly covers the following points:

- ❖ *The Historical background of the feast,*
- ❖ *The reasons for the celebration of the feast, and its spiritual symbols and meanings, &*
- ❖ *The different names used for the feast.*



The Coptic New Year

The word "Coptic", means Egyptian, which is derived from the old hieroglyphic language of the ancient Egyptian's and the Pharaoh's.

The Coptic calendar and year, is the oldest known calendar in the world. It was established by the great astronomer Toot, in the year 4241 BC.

Toot was known as the "lord of science", and was also famous for establishing the very first Egyptian system of writing, that being the hieroglyphic language. He developed an alphabet in which he used symbols of birds, animals and creatures to structure letters and words.

Toot set up his calendar based on the appearance of the great star Sirius – also known in Europe as "A canis majoris" (the dog star), and in the hieroglyphic language as "sebdet". This star appears always directly in line with the earth and the sun once a year. It rises before the sun for a short time with its light beam being twenty-six times greater than the light of the sun, and is two-hundred times the size of the sun.

All the astronomers at that time agreed that this "Dog Star" was far more accurate in calculating the Calendar year than the sun.

Toot divided the year into twelve equal months with thirty days exactly for each month. He then added a thirteenth month made up of five days to complete the year, and called it the small month. The small month is usually five days in length and six days every leap year.

As the life of the Ancient Egyptians relied heavily on the flooding of the river Nile every year for the agricultural purposes, they adjusted the beginning of their calendar to coincide with this vital inundation period. It was also adjusted to coincide with the sun rising on the first day of the year on the religious month of manf.

Old celebrations and customs for The Coptic New Year

The ancient Egyptians held great celebrations concerning the flooding of the river Nile, as it was the main source of their existence. They had great celebratory processions headed by the Pharaoh and all the priests, ministers and chiefs of the people. They walked along the banks of the river Nile and offered sacrifices, caught traditional foods and held big feasts and rejoiced greatly.

These traditions were kept and handed down from generation to generation, as great celebrations for the whole Egyptian nation and when St Mark the apostle visited Egypt in the year 42 AD and preached Christianity, the first Egyptian copts maintained the same celebrations of the pagan Egyptians new year as it was a national feast. The celebrations were later adapted in a spiritual form with prayers and a mass celebrating the day, however, the same sorts of foods were eaten on the day. The copts also altered the feasts' processions where they would parade around the church with the relics of the martyrs and saints – this will be explained in detail later.

The origin of the name used for the first day of the Coptic year

The Egyptians called that day "El Nayrouz". This came from the prayers used by the ancient Egyptians before the flooding of the river Nile. They prayed to their gods to bring the flood at the right time as the flood fertilised the land enabling the healthy crops to grow, on which they depended to survive. Their prayers were mainly made up of the words "bless the waters of the river" which was "Niyaro Ezmou" in the old

Coptic language. Knowledge of the original Coptic language decreased over the generations, and after the occupation of Egypt by other nations, the words "Niyaro ezmou" which were spoken by the original inhabitants of Egypt were understood by the new comers as "Nayrouz." While the two letters "El" means the definitive article "the".

When the Europeans occupied Egypt, they found the Egyptians holding these great celebrations and heard them repeating the prayer of "Niyaro ezmou". At the same time they saw new roses coming up on the face of the land, and as a result they took the words "Niyaro Ezmou" in their own language to mean the celebration of the "New Rose" which sounds like "Nayrouz"

Relationship between The Coptic New Year and The Feast of Martyrs

When one looks at the historical persecutions in Egypt, the number of Christians who were martyred in Egypt is far greater than any country throughout the whole world. It is also known that the Roman Emperors and kings persecuted Christians, especially those of Egypt and the Middle East. One of those kings was Diocletian whose reign started in the year 284 AD and ended in 305 AD.

During this time the greatest number of Christian Egyptians were killed as Diocletian declared that he would continue killing the Christians of Egypt till their blood fills the streets and reaches the knees of his horse.

As a result of the numerous Christians martyred during the reign of Diocletian, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt reset the Coptic calendar and established another name for the Coptic new year, this being "The year of Martyrs." At that time the entire Egyptian

population were Christians. That is why we now find that the year of the Coptic calendar which started in the year 284 AD is slightly less than that of the Roman calendar.

As mentioned before, the original Coptic calendar was established in the year 4241 BC, then it was recalculated and named the "year of martyrs" when king Diocletian started his reign in the year 284 AD. To accurately calculate the interim of the Coptic calendar, we should add 4241 BC (the start of the old Coptic calendar) to 284 AD which equals 4525 years.

We are now celebrating the year 1721 of the martyrs but if one calculates the duration of the Coptic calendar back to the time when the Egyptian/Coptic calendar, in the age of Toot the great ancient Egypt astronomer, it would be 6245 years.



The differences between the weekdays of the modern Gregorian calendar and the old Coptic calendar

The structure of the old Egyptian/Coptic calendar, established by Toot, was the first to divide time into spans of years, months, weeks and days. The ancient Egyptians named the months after the seasons of the year and times of seeding and cultivation. They also named the weekdays after the planets in relation to the earth, and ordered them according to the different gods of the planets they worshipped on each day.

The names of the weekdays of the old Coptic calendar, are quite similar to those of the Gregorian except for some changes in the spelling.

The days of the week in the old Coptic calendar were ordered according to the following planets:

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| 1. Sun | 5. Jupiter |
| 2. Moon | 6. Venus |
| 3. Mars | 7. Saturn |
| 4. Mercury | |

- ❖ The first day is known as Sunday as they worshipped the sun god.
- ❖ The second day is Monday as they worshipped the moon god.
- ❖ The third day they worshipped the god "Tyr" or "Tuer" of the planet Mars, and for that reason it is known as Tuesday in the European language.
- ❖ The fourth day they worshipped the god "Woden" or "Weeden" of the planet Mercury, and is hence known as Wednesday.
- ❖ The fifth day they worshipped the god "Thur" of the planet Jupiter, and is thus known as Thursday.
- ❖ The sixth day they worshipped the god "Freya" of the planet Venus, and therefore it is known as Friday.
- ❖ The seventh day they worshipped the god "Saturn" of the planet Saturn, and therefore it is known as Saturday.

From this you can see that the Egyptian/Coptic calendar was the foundation of all calendars known throughout the world to the present day.



The names of the Coptic months and where they fall according to the calendar used in the western world

The Coptic Church uses the Coptic Calendar to establish events and celebrate all church feasts throughout the year. The Coptic calendar sets the time for feasts, important memorial occasions, fasts, other rituals and celebrations in the liturgical life of the church.

In all the official documents of the church for example, Baptism Certificates, deacon and priesthood Ordination Certificates, official letters, and minutes of the official church council and committee meetings, the date of the Coptic year is inserted next to the date of the Gregorian calendar currently used.

We wish to mention here the names of the Coptic Year months and the reason for these names.

The order of the months is related to the Egyptians practical life, looking at the weather and periods for cultivation. Until modern times the farmers - whether Christians, Moslems or otherwise - follow the Coptic calendar for sowing seedlings, watering and harvesting, as it is the most accurate for determining the exact time for all the different types of cultivation throughout the year.

The names of the Coptic calendar months, their origin and where they fall according to the western world calendar currently used.

TOOT (11 September – 10 October), is named after the great astronomer "TOOT" who was considered the god of science and knowledge, and the founder of the written hieroglyphic language. Toot established the old Egyptian calendar. During this month the Egyptians plough the land for watering by the River Nile becoming flooded.

BABA (11 October – 9 November), is named after the Pharaoh god "Hapi" who was the prodigal god of the river Nile. During this month the floodwaters fill the River Nile bed and banks with the affluent mud which enriched the land for cultivation. The Egyptian saying for this month is "*Baba, khosh we ekfel el-Daraba*", which means Baba, enter and shut the daraba (daraba being a small opening found in the old home doors). This month marks the end of autumn and the beginning of winter.

HATOUR (10 November – 9 December), is named after "Hatour" who was the ancient Egyptians goddess of love and beauty, known as

Efrododet in the Greek language. During this month the face of the land is covered with cotton, vegetables and fruits. They used to say in Egypt "*Hatour, abou El-Dahab el-mantour*", which means Hatour is the month in which gold is thrown on the face of the earth. Cotton was considered as precious as gold and remains to be their source for wealth and livelihood until today.

KOYAK (10 December – 8 January), is named after the ancient Egyptian god "Kiahaka", who was the god of good. This is always the month in which the fasting for the birth of Christ (The Advent) falls. They say in Egypt "*Koyak, sabahak mesak*", which means in the month of Koyak your morning is like your evening, because this month falls in the middle of winter where the sun rises late and the evening is early and the day is cloudy (marking the shortest days of winter).

TOOBA (9 January – 7 February), is the month during which the weather becomes very cold and all winter crops start to grow. Farmers also start sowing the seeds for the summer cultivation. There is a saying about this month to express it's severe cold weather, that is "*Tooba, temel el sabia karkooba*", which means Tooba turns the young girl into an old woman.

AMSHEER (8 February – 9 March), is named after the god of the wind, and is well known for it's stormy winds all over Egypt. It makes the newly planted trees stronger. During this month they plant sugar cane and corn, they reap figs, apples, cucumber, apricots and plums. The saying for this month is "*Amsheer abou el-zaabeer*", which means that in Amsheer the winds are so strong they could blow away the old people in the streets.

BARAMHAT (10 March – 8 April), is named after the ancient Egyptian god "Pamont" who is the god of heat. In this month they harvest crops of vegetables, cotton and mulberries. There is a saying, "*Baramhat, etlaa el-ghait wehat*", which means during Baramhat you go to the fields and collect.

PARAMOUDAH (9 April – 8 May), is named after the Ancient Egyptian god "Ranooda" who is the god of the harvest.

During this month farmers harvest wheat and separate the wheat from the straw. People used to say, "*Paramoudah, bookh bel-amoeba*", which means in Paramoudah, shake the wheat bundles and separate the wheat from the straw. During this time they also harvest lentils, watermelons and Termis beans.

BASHANS (9 May – 7 June), is named after the god "Shawnsou", the moon god. During this month, days are longer and nights are shorter and farmers harvest the rest of the crops. For this reason they used to say, "*Bashans, yeknes el-ghet kans*", which means in Bashans you sweep the fields clean.

BAOONA (8 June – 7 July), is well known for its very hot weather and strong early morning sun before 6am. During this month the land is very dry and so are most of the trees. For this reason they used to say "*Baoona, yeflak el-hagar*", which means in Baoona the very high temperature breaks even the hardest stones. They also said, "*Baoona, ye nashef el-mayah fel shagar*", which means Baoona dries the water in the trees. During Baoona farmers collect the honey from the beehives and also start cultivating rice and corn. They harvest grapes, pears and peaches.

ABEEB (8 July – 6 August) is named after the ancient Egyptian god "Abeeb" who is the god of joy in heaven. During this month, the water of the River Nile starts to rise after being very low in the past two months. They say "*Abeeb, maa el-neel yedeb feeh dabeib*", which means the waters of the River Nile start to flow in it plentifully. This month is known for the best harvest of grapes and at the end of it, the grapes dry on the vines and become sultanas. For this reason they say, "*Abeeb, tabbakh el-nab wel zebeeb*", which means, Abeeb cooks the best of grapes and sultanas.

MESRA or **MESOUR** (7 August – 5 September), the word "Mesra" is from the original Coptic word "Mesri" which means the birth of the sun. During Mesra the days are still long while the sun is mild, and farmers can work in the sun comfortably for long hours. They work hard in cultivating and preparing the land for the new season, and for receiving the waters of the flood

carrying the affluent mud. During Mesra dates, figs, grapes, and olives are ready for harvesting. Farmers start cultivating onions, garlic and tomatoes, and prepare for the season of trees and other vegetables. For this reason they say, "*En fatak Mesra, matel-ash wala kesra*", which means if you miss out on working hard in the month of Mesra, you will find it hard to even have a piece of bread to eat.

EL NASEE (6 September – 10 September), is known as the small month which the astronomer Toot had established to complete the remaining time until the star Sirius appears again in its route.



Rituals, traditions and customs in the past and present

As previously mentioned, the Coptic calendar was established in 4241 BC. Until the birth of Christ, the Coptic New Year feast, as we know it now, was one of the highlighted national feasts in Egypt, "*the flooding of the River Nile feast*". It was celebrated with rituals headed by the high priests and ancient Egyptians worshipping Pharaohs and gods. It involved rituals and customs which were held before, during, and after the official religious celebrations. The entire Egyptian nation continued celebrating the feast dressed in their special costume, carrying bunches of flowers, roses, palm tree branches and fresh dates. They prepared old Egyptian foods like Zalabia and Mehalabia. They also cooked Molokhia (which is green leaf soup) as the main meal, processed cooked dates, and ate Guava fruit. They walked in processions around homes and gardens rejoicing with the flooding of the River Nile and prayed for the blessing of the Nile waters.

Before we start talking about the celebrations in the Coptic Orthodox Church life, we will focus on the spiritual understanding and symbolism which made the church recount the Coptic New Year and calendar, and celebrate an old pagan feast but rather in a spiritual way.



Explaining the spiritual understandings and symbols from past to present

Past (Before Christ)	Present (After Christ)
1. The flooding of the River Nile, which was the main source of life in Egypt, always highlights the beginning of the new year.	The Church, first and foremost is concerned with the spiritual life of the people. With the establishment of the church in Egypt, year 42 AD, the church maintained the same celebrations but chose to adopt them in a spiritual way. The church did this by holding a mass, and praying for the well being and life of the congregation, as well as their continuous spiritual renewing in Jesus Christ our Lord.
2. This time of year, as we explained, was always recognised by the floodwaters, watering the face of the land, during which time the new crops also grew.	The church adopted this in a spiritual manner, hence, having the water as a symbol to the word of God – in both the old and new testaments. With the waters, the word of God, filling the hearts of people, we may hence have a new life in Christ and the fruits of good Christian deeds will grow.
3. The priests of the Ancient Egyptians taught the people during the festivals to thank the god of the River Nile for his generosity. They also taught the people to be generous with one another. They would not only have a new season of cultivation, but have a new start in their personal lives.	The church uses the same understanding to encourage the people to perform good charitable deeds for one another, to review their lives, and to have a new true Christian start with the new year.

4. The waters of the River Nile used to rise and produce rich muddy flood at that time of year, denoting the beginning of the new year. Floodwaters covered the face of the earth for a healthy new cultivation season, and the fields became rich with different fruits and harvests that would sustain the life of the people.

Year 284 AD was the first year of the reign of Diocletian the Roman King who killed the greatest number of Christians.

It is said that with every martyr killed tens and hundreds of people believed in Christ and announced their Christianity. This drove Diocletian insane and subsequently led to his death after prolonged and dreadful suffering.

The church denoted what happened symbolically, relating the blood of the numerous martyrs flooded over the land of Egypt, watering the hearts of the people, and as a result, announced a full new season of planting real Christianity in their hearts, offering the fruits of their lives to Christ Himself.

For that reason, the church recounted the Coptic calendar back to the time of Diocletian's reign and now we are celebrating the Coptic new year 1721, even though the Coptic calendar goes back to 6420 years ago.



The adaptation of the pagan feast with its rituals, traditions and customs to The Coptic New Year

As we mentioned above, the Coptic Orthodox Church has kept the celebration of the Coptic New Year. Beginning as a national feast thousands of years ago, the church highlights the spiritual meanings of the feast and encourages believers to consider that this is not only a time of customs related to food and drinks, but rather to be one of spiritual benefit and change of life to a better Christian one.

The church added another name to that feast of the Coptic New Year, "El Nayrouz", also known as "the feast of the martyrs".

The rituals and traditions for the Feast at present

The Coptic Orthodox Church added to the liturgical service, some hymns, praises and other sections that are specific to the feast of the Coptic New Year. They carry meanings to recognise martyrdom as one of the foundations of the church. It also carries the meaning of the New Year in the life of the true Christian believer and the importance of having continuous spiritual fruits in their life.

The church uses joyful tunes in the liturgical services and prayers between the Coptic New Year and the feast of the Holy Cross (which falls 17 days after El-Nayrouz). The church also joined the feast of El Nayrouz and the feast of the Holy Cross with a period in which the same rituals and hymns are continuously used. According to the church beliefs, the feast of martyrs is a memorial of how the martyrs offered themselves as a true living sacrifice for Christ, simulating Christ, who offered himself as the real and eternal sacrifice on the cross for the sake of all.

During vespers for the feast of Martyrs - "El Nayrouz", the Coptic Church conducts a great procession around the church and the altar with special rituals and praises. While the deacons carry the icons and tubes containing relics of martyrs. The priests raises incense before the relics and the icons during the procession. This is carried out to highlight to the believers, that those martyrs, although were killed a long time ago, are continuously alive with Christ in paradise (which is the victorious church in heaven). Moreover, that they are sharing with us our life of worship while we are still in the *"struggling church on earth"*.

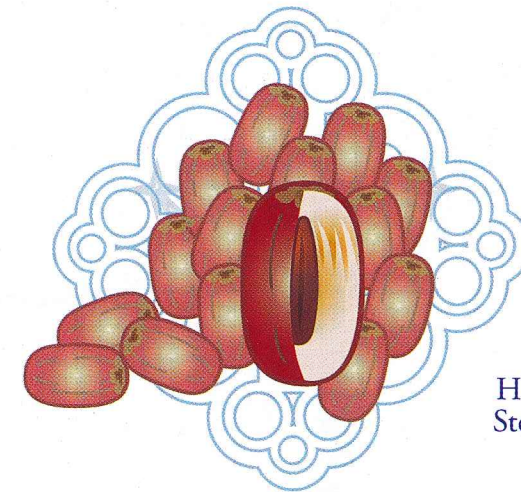
Why the dates? What do they symbolise?

The church distributes fresh red dates (symbolic of the martyrs) to the congregation and Sunday school children, it is described as follows:

The red colour of the date is a symbol of the blood of the martyrs, which has been shed for the sake of Christ.

The white flesh on the inside of the date is a symbol of the pure heart of the martyrs, while the hard seed inside is symbolic of the strong faith of the martyrs which enabled them to sacrifice their whole life for Christ.

As we mentioned previously, the Ancient Egyptians ate dates and held palm branches in their celebrations. The church today also uses the date and the palm tree to symbolise the strong faith of the true Christian which we will now explain further.



The Date;

RED OUTSIDE =
Blood of
Martyrdom

WHITE FLESH =
Purity of heart

HARD SEED INSIDE =
Steadfastness in faith



The meaning of the palm tree and its relationship to the True Christian person

The palm tree is so high, and the true believer is also high in their spiritual life.

Typically, the palm tree is a very strong tree as its roots reach deeply into the ground, and so too, the Christian is very strong, being deeply rooted in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The trunk is always long, and the true Christian is long suffering and patient.

The palm tree endures hard weather and lack of water, and the true Christian in the orthodox life is well trained in enduring hard strict rules of Orthodoxy with long fasting, lengthy prayers and services.



The Palm Tree;

TALL, HIGH TREE =
High in spiritual life

STRONG &
DEEP ROOTED =
Strength in Christ
our Lord

FLEXIBLE & WEATHER TOLERANT =
Endurance with fasting & praying

SWEET FRUIT =
Decency & good natured

The fruit of the palm tree is always sweet, and the true Christian is always a nice decent person, his conduct is constantly sweet with everyone.

The trunk of the palm tree on the outside looks dark, but when you cut it, it is beautifully white on the inside. The same applies to the true Christians, they do not care about adorning themselves on the outside, but the most care is given to the beauty of the spirit inside them.

If we hit the palm tree with a stone, it will give us fruits, which are dates. The true Christians, when insulted, bless those who insult them and forgive them, as Christians are instructed to love their enemies. Furthermore, St Paul the Apostle asks the true Christian to feed his enemy and to provide them with no quench to his own thirst.

The palm tree branches are very useful in making baskets, sheds and different items, and so is the Christian, as he is helpful to others in every possible way.

The trunk of the palm tree is very straight, and so is the true Christian, straight and truthful at all times.



Overview of The Coptic New Year celebration in the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Australia

In a migrant country where Copts have come to settle, there is a gradual loss of values to the life they may have lived in the church, and to the general customs of Egypt. If the Coptic Orthodox Church in Australia practices short liturgies and modernised services to match life in western countries, people will forget those great values, traditions and customs inherited from generation to generation over thousands of years. As a result, these values and traditions will be lost with time.

Thank God that we have been able to maintain those traditions, rituals, customs and values, which we inherited from our grandparents.

We are very keen on practicing everything as they used to be and are still practiced in Egypt. We teach and explain these traditions to the congregation, and place a great emphasis on the new generations who are born in Australia, such as Sunday school children, and encourage them to act in plays and sketches, and to learn hymns and praises. We expect traditions and teaching will result in the following:

We bring a cultural treasure inherited thousands of years ago in Australia, which has not been known or seen before in Australia's multicultural and diverse society.

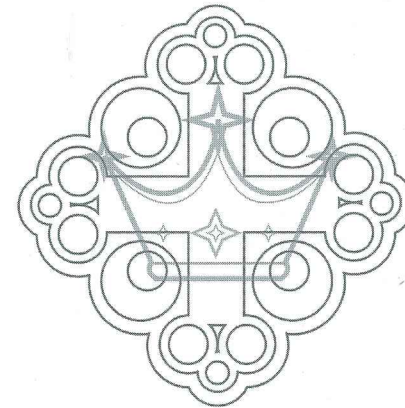
When the children are educated about the life of martyrs and their great sacrifice, they are encouraged to sacrifice for one another, or at least keep their Christian principals and values. This will help in bringing a more enhanced moral level to the Australian society.

When the new generations are educated, having implanted in them those spiritual meanings of the church celebrations which we explained above, (for example the meanings of the palm tree), they will be carrying some of those meanings in their lives and conduct, presenting true Christian values which is very much needed in the young society today.

By attending rituals and services in the church, especially the procession with the icons and relics of the saints, the people remember that the martyrs were human beings like them, that those martyrs kept their values and sacrificed their life for them. This encourages Copts to sacrifice themselves for their values, honesty, sincerity and truthfulness in their lives.

This also is very much needed in today's society for the continuation of its well-being.

The greatest value for any nation or society is in its history, so bringing and practicing those rituals, traditions and celebrations keeps that great history of the Ancient Egyptians alive throughout the Coptic community. This in itself, is of great value to Australia, being their new home and country.





CONCLUSION



What we have mentioned above is just a part of many meanings and understandings in the celebration of the Coptic New Year "El Nayrouz" the "Feast of Martyrs". This feast itself is only one of many feasts celebrated in the ritual and traditional life of the Coptic Orthodox Church every year.

This might just be one example that tells of some of the depths of the hidden treasures intrenched in the spiritual, ritual and traditional worship which exists in the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic Church is one of the oldest churches in the world, being established in 42 AD by St Mark the Apostle, who wrote the second Gospel in the New Testament of the Holy Bible.

Hopefully we will meet again in another booklet studying the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

We take this opportunity to tell everyone that our church is always open and fully welcoming to all. Come share and ask any questions, regardless of race, nationality or denomination.

We always pray for the world, for the well-being of all humans, for the safety of all other creations, for peace, for love, for unity, and for everyone to return to God. We ask all to pray for us.

*Happy Coptic New Year,
may God Bless you in His Holy Name.
Amen.*