

SPEECH ON THE HOLY MONASTERY OF ST. GEORGE, OLD CAIRO, OF ARCHBISHOP MAKARIOS OF KENYA

It is very difficult to know the exact date of the establishment of the Holy Monastery of St. George, since we don't have enough information being related concerning the history of this very ancient monastery in Old Cairo. After some deep investigations, there is a possibility that the monastery was established during the sixth century, in the year 530. A certain historic person, Theodosios, in his book about the position of the Holy Land in 530 and the waste of the sons of Israel, speaks about the ancient town of Memphis in Egypt, where the Pharaohs used to live and

where Joseph was put in prison. He mentions that in this place there are two monasteries; one of

them is of the pious monastics of God and the other one of the monks, that is to say of St.

Jeremiah and St. Apollonios the Hermit. For us, this information is of paramount importance.

Although the historian does not give the name of the monastery, yet he speaks of the two

monasteries in Memphis, it allows us to suppose that St. George Monastery is the one which is

situated in that area.

If we support our opinion on the fact that the ancient city of Memphis is the present

Cairo, then our hopes are increased that we are really talking about the Monastery of St. George.

Special archeologists accept that the ancient city of Memphis was the capital of Egypt.

According to our Greek historian Herodotos, that ancient city was founded by Pharaoh Menes.

On the site where this great city was founded, the River Nile was running. Another historian, this

time an Arab one from Baghdad who visited Egypt during the beginning of the thirteenth

century, argues and accepts the idea that the great city of Memphis is actually Old Cairo. Many

European authors, archeologists and historians believe that the old city of Memphis is the present

Old Cairo. At the same time, many patriarchal documents of the seventeenth century give exactly

this same information and support the idea.

The place where we are standing today and where we are celebrating this auspicious opening of the restoration of the unique rotunda of St. George is a place which has been known

for thousands of years before Christianity. We can say that this place where we are today is a

place which was known to the famous Alexander the Great, his successors, and the Egyptian

Pharaohs, and we can affirm that from this place, all these civilizations actually established their

roots and gave out their light, a light of hope and a light of knowledge to so many people

throughout the history of humanity. With the arrival of Christianity, this place where we are

today is the exact spot where the infant Jesus came with Mary and Joseph to hide

from the persecution of Herod. Definitely the various civilizations throughout the ages before and after Christianity have given to the whole world a new dimension, a new message and a new structure of the lives of the different people who passed through this holy place in which Jesus Christ himself stayed for some time.

We know that that Egypt during the golden era of Christianity became the center of the Christian monastic life. From the deserts of Nitria and Thebais, this movement of monasticism began a new chapter in the history of Christianity. Monasticism appeared during the fourth century as the way of bringing people together for their own salvation first, by living in a communion of life, and then for the others who were in the world, for their salvation through prayers and fasting. The persecutions of the Roman emperors during the first years of

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Christianity gave some people the chance to search for a new style of life which would assist them to implement the truth and virtues of Christianity. This new way of life was introduced by St. Anthony the Great, whose Life was written by Athanasios, the Patriarch of Alexandria. St. Anthony is considered to be the father of monasticism, although before him in Egypt, there was a very well-known hermit, Paul from Thebais. Anthony the Great, by introducing this new way of life, was able to demonstrate his way of life in the deserted areas of Egypt, and very quickly he was able to attract many young people who wanted to live that life in the desert of Nitria.

Another important contributor to this new life is St. Pachomios, who for the first time introduced the system of cenobitic life in the year 320. That is why Egypt became the prototype of that Orthodox Eastern monasticism and for this reason we have so many well-known ascetics like Makarios of Egypt, Nile the Ascetic, Arsenios the Great, Evagrius and Isidoros. It is in this way that the monastic ideology was cultivated in Egypt and many monastic centers were established which today are giving their testimony to us and are leading us to the history of monasticism in Egypt. One such great monastic center was the place where we are today.

It is very important to mention that Greeks arrived in Egypt, here where we are, during the sixth century before Christ, with the arrival of Alexander the Great, when the ancient Greek civilization was brought and established among the Egyptian population. During those years and also later on, with the establishment of the Church of Alexandria through St. Mark

the Apostle and Evangelist, the Greek civilization and knowledge and wisdom have given new dimensions in the lives of the people, especially of the local communities here in Egypt. Cairo itself was established in the year 970, and as such, became a capital of the Egyptians during the twelfth century, which means that already the Greek presence through the ancient Greek civilization and the Christian message of the Gospel have given to the people of Egypt a strong and productive element which assisted them to grow spiritually, academically and socially. In the newly-established Egyptian state, the great renovator and protector of the Egyptian nation was Mohammed Ali, who, during his time, invited Greek people to come and start their new lives here in the land of the Nile. It is important also to mention that many holy Patriarchs of Alexandria established themselves in this place where we are and became strong keepers of the ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations and of different monuments which they kept under great protection. As we have seen already, in this holy and magnificent place where we are standing today, the different civilizations which were here played an important role in the development of the cultures of the people in this area. St. George's Monastery is a place which has embraced all kinds of civilizations throughout the centuries. And as we are standing here today, at the beginning of this third millennium, our minds, our thoughts, our actions should be directed to the perspective that we, as different as we are among ourselves, having different cultural approaches and civilizations, today are able to meet, to have a dialogue, and to say that we are able to work together. We are able to listen to one another through dialogue. We are able to exchange among ourselves different ideas. Sometimes we are not in full agreement, but still we are able to live harmoniously and establish our society in such a way that peace and unity may prevail among our people. Each and every civilization in this place where we are today has contributed in a positive way by promoting mutual respect, friendship and understanding. Even if we belong to different !2 cultures, we speak different languages, and we practice different religious beliefs, this holy place where we are today is giving to us the message of recognizing the deep roots which our civilizations are giving to all of humanity for peaceful coexistence and cooperation, respect,

tolerance, endurance, dignity, equality. All our civilizations which have passed through this holy monastery, before and after Christianity, have made valuable contributions and they have shared together those valuable aspects for all of humanity. That is the reason that today, as we are together with the heads of the states and the heads of our religion, especially the presence of His Beatitude the Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa, Theodoros II, we are once more affirming that all of us under the present difficult international ethnic controls and struggles should establish a common way in order to enrich our knowledge in a strategic way so that there may be no more wars, conflicts, attacks. Rather we should tell the international community that we here in Egypt are recognizing the important role by which, as citizens of this country, we are able to play a central role in our society by respecting one another and by utilizing the fundamental values which can assist us to establish a more lasting and dynamic society. As leaders of the Church and the state, we should use all expedient means and ways to remove disputes and conflicts, animosity, violence and clashes. By so doing we are creating the awareness of a mutual and peaceful coexistence, which is the way our fathers lived for so many centuries. We should not focus on things which are dividing us but we should strive to find what we have in common and how to enrich one another in order to strengthen our relations through dialogue. Today St. George is actually sounding an alarm call that we should preserve and consolidate peace and security, freedom, justice, respect, and understanding. Your Excellencies, the Presidents of the Republics of Egypt and Greece, I am not myself a politician but as a Church leader commissioned by His Beatitude, our Pope, to address you today, and as one who makes his second home in the African continent, I can say today that all of us should work towards one common goal: to respect all kinds of human freedom and democracy, conscience and thoughts. We should underline that people and societies can promote significant steps in understanding one another and shaping in our society, with its different civilizations, an expression of love and respect for one another, if we want to save our beloved country of Egypt. As we are already in the third millennium, we are all recognizing that in the present situation where we are, we are facing changes and many difficult challenges which are obstacles for our human stability, unity, security and peace. We are living in a world where multicultural

and ethnic and religious civilization are forming this strange globalization which sometimes leads us to disagreements, suspicions and exclusion of the other. It gives me great joy this evening, with the blessings and authority of our Pope and Patriarch Theodoros II, to address you all and to say a few words about this place where we are. When the late Patriarch Petros VII invited me to come and stay in this holy place for three months to research and to write the history of the monastery, I found that it was in this place that I was able to understand the importance of the valuable treasures of this historic sites and to discover that this place was unique because Christians are coming to pray in front of the miraculous icon of St. George, alongside our Muslim brothers. Therefore, this place is becoming not only a place of pan-Christian heritage and pilgrimage but at the same time an interreligious place of worship, which means that Christians and Muslims are able to coexist and even to pray together. In this paramount and magnificent place, one can take in the wealth, the history, the culture, the art, the archeology. Put them together and you realize that because of their long history you are able to discover the Alexandrian, the Pharaonic, the Roman, the Byzantine, and the Egyptian civilizations. As the Bible says in Exodus 3:5, "The place on which you are standing is holy ground." This magnificent cathedral of St. George is constructed as a rotunda, a unique example of the architectural style of the baptismal font of the ancient Church. Not only the Church of St. George but also the ancient Babylonian tower, the ancient Roman and Byzantine walls, and all the other ancient treasures, have been kept here from the time of Emperor Justinian and of the Pharaohs and the great king Ptolemy. And at the same time, there is the historic cemetery which is unique as the necropolis where there is the rich presence of the Greeks in Egypt, together with their coreligious brothers from Russia, from Serbia, from Romania, and even from China. It is in this way that, when we are studying all these ancient monuments, we discover in a very deep and meaningful way how important our history is for both Greeks and Egyptians. For centuries all these beautiful collections were kept unknown to the public, but the right time now has come for all of us to admire the beauty and the worth, the colors and the technique, and at the same time to derive messages, teachings, and lessons from their prehistoric existence and civilization. With a lot of insistence, endurance, faith and above all, love

for everything
which is worthy, you don't care about time and tiredness. When somebody loves this
very
extraordinary and special work of discovering new insights of the history of
civilization, he feels
a lot of hope because he discovers its ecumenical dimensions, universal values, and
therefore the
grandeur of the history of a very ancient civilization is actually increased.
For this reason, today we have in front of us the historic past and the memory of
each and
every object. It is in this way that we are able to write the real history of this
place, St. George's
Monastery. It is here that the water of the Nile is passing and traverses the
ancient and historic
tower of Babylon. The items and objects which are presented here today are not only
the interest
of a researcher of archeology or philology or theology or history or art, etc. It
is here that there is
also the tomb of the New Martyrs Gabriel and Kermidoli (1522) as well as the tombs
of the
Patriarchs of Alexandria, the prison of St. George, mosaic presentations of the
first days of
Byzantine history, stones, columns, and hieroglyphic presentations and letters and
sarcophagi
with similar presentations and letters. And all these are the relics of a unique
history which
consists of monuments of civilization and cooperation. That is the reason why this
monastery
here remains to be one of the most important centers of Christianity and generally
of humanity,
because in different times all the civilizations met, and today it is becoming a
universal cultural
center, a unique meeting place in the area of the Middle East.
Today, Your Beatitude, Father and Master, allow me to express my gratitude to you
for
the honor and the confidence to my humble and unworthy person, to present to you
and to our
esteemed personalities from Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, etc. May the Lord God give you
many years
to continue this great and exceptional effort to see that our civilizations will
never die, as long as
we are preserving them and using them for reasons of mutual understanding. Indeed,
this is the
way to maintain our long, ancient, and historic civilizations.