



**Pope Shenouda III**

*Photo courtesy of Baron Harlek*

# My Journey with His Holiness Pope Shenouda III: a One-Day Memoir

(October 10, 1989)

By

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After hearing of the death of Coptic Pope Shenouda III on March 17, 2012 at age 88, my thoughts turned once again to October 10, 1989, the day that I and other Holy Sepulchre Knights visited with the Pope.

## **Background**

First, some background might be helpful. In Christian history, the five great Apostolic Sees of Christianity were Rome and Antioch (in Syria), said to have been established by Peter; the see at Constantinople (Byzantium), founded by Andrew; the see at Alexandria (Egypt), founded by Mark; and the see at Jerusalem, founded by James, the brother of Jesus. (The word 'see' comes from the Latin for seat, "sedes.") Each Apostolic See was headed by a Pope (from Greek "pappas," meaning "father"). As the power of the Church shifted from Jerusalem to Rome, the Pope in Rome began to claim exclusive right to the title of Pope. Eventually, three Apostolic Sees relinquished the title – except for the Apostolic See at Alexandria, which maintained that its right to the title was historic and co-equal. Hence, to this very day, two Popes exist, one heading the Latin Catholics from Rome and one heading the Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox from Cairo (formerly Alexandria), Egypt.

## **How I Was Invited**

In 1989, Pope Shenouda embarked on an American tour of every Coptic church in Canada and the United States. The visit included the

Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Mark in Englewood, Colorado (a kind of suburb to Denver) where a new Altar was to be consecrated. Through of my friendship with several Orthodox Christians, I was invited to this event. Also invited were OHS Knights Their Excellencies the Baron and Baroness of Harlek, and the Rt. Hon. Chev. Matthew Haines.

### **Our Reception**

The drive from Greeley, Colorado to Denver takes only about an hour, so we Knights arrived October 10 at 8 AM, refreshed, but not knowing what to expect. Of course, we wore knightly garb to this event. We were warmly welcomed by many Coptic laity as we walked to the church building. I remember thinking that I had seen these faces before...somewhere. But where? Then, I realized where: these were the same faces that can be seen, stylized, on the walls in the ancient tombs of the Pharaohs and in the realistic statues of that ancient culture, long before the Arab invasions of Egypt in later centuries. I was looking at the descendents of the Pharaohs, perhaps, or, at least, of their servants. Who could say? But I realized that these are an old people and a venerable culture.

As we walked into the church, which was already full, sudden applause broke out among those already seated in the pews. They saw in us exactly who we were: visitors come to welcome a Coptic Pope to Colorado.

We weren't sure where to sit, so we thought we would take the time-honored position of visitors: in the back pew. But no. Almost immediately, the Vicar (not his actual title, which I can't recall) of Pope Shenouda came to us and led us right to the front pews. That Vicar was Bishop Bishoy, who, although he was very busy with other matters, watched us to make sure that we were comfortable. Bishop Bishoy (the only name I ever heard during the entire day) had a stern and determined look, the kind of look one gets when one has to make absolutely certain that a dozen activities must coordinate and function smoothly. In the pew behind us, one of the Copts leaned over and whispered words of welcome and said he was proud that we had been seated the front pew, a place of honor. Priests and bishops of other Orthodox denominations were also seated there.

Bishop Bishoy then reappeared and wanted to know who these knightly-attired were, and I explained the Order to him, both its history and doctrine. The Bishop, whose English was excellent, listened with intensity and considerable interest. "I will report this to His Holiness," he said, and off he went.

While Bishop Bishoy was off reporting, we had an opportunity to examine and admire the Iconostasis of the church and to further admire the devotional attitude of the congregation, which consisted of young and old. Clearly, these people loved their church and its leaders and were very excited to see their Pope.

Suddenly, Bishop Bishoy was next to us, wearing his stern face. I thought for a moment that we might be ushered out—but we weren't. Rather, Bishop Bishoy said, "His Holiness warmly welcomes you and hopes that you will stay the entire day, because he invites you to the private audience he will be holding this afternoon." A private audience with the Pope was an unexpected blessing, and we assured Bishop Bishoy that we would be present all day.

The Baron of Harlek was and is a skilled photographer, and I believe that at this time he received permission from Bishop Bishoy to take photographs during the events of the day. This permission resulted in a number of beautiful color photographs of the entire proceedings. The Baron's photograph of Pope Shenouda meditating in the Papal Throne was greatly enlarged and now hangs, as I recall, in the Coptic cathedral in Los Angeles. Many other fine and artistic photographs taken by Baron Harlek were gratefully received by Pope Shenouda.

### **The Liturgy and The Blessing of the Altar**

The Liturgy began a little after 9 AM, and we settled in for what we expected to be a wonderful experience, and it was certainly a wonderful experience—for our eyes, not our ears, for the entire Liturgy was in Coptic! We Westerners had no real idea of what was happening, except for a general knowledge of the structure of Liturgy. I distinctly remember a young Coptic clergy, a Deacon, who rushed over with Liturgy books, gave each of us one, turned to the correct page, and then, happily satisfied, returned to his place in the Sanctuary before the Iconostasis. OK, fine, but we couldn't read Coptic too well, so we were almost right away lost. When the young Deacon saw that we were not following, he again rushed over, turned each Liturgy to the correct page, and again returned, satisfied. We realized that he would continue doing

this for the next several hours, so our solution was to watch when others turned the page—and we turned our pages, too. This artifice worked very well, and the young Deacon was able to attend to other duties, although I believe that he slyly watched us to make sure we were following!

The Liturgy proceeded along its ancient way, completely sung in tunes that probably were sung as the pyramids were built, long before Christian era, but which were adopted by the Copts for their hymns to Mary, Christ, and the Trinity. As we listened, we could discern the pattern of the music, so we sang along as best we could, filled with the joy of Coptic liturgy, understanding in our hearts, if not our minds.

Pope Shenouda was not celebrating the Liturgy very early during the ceremonies. Rather, he was seated in the Papal Throne about 5 feet from us, in full Coptic Pontifical vestments and bearing the Caduceus that is the crozier of the Orthodox bishops. Surrounding him were deacons, priests, and bishops, each with one or more Liturgical tasks, yet the Pope sat meditatively, although he was fully aware of everything, as we later learned.

The Iconostasis was fully open, and soon, the Coptic clergy repaired to the inner sanctuary for the blessing and anointing of the cube-shaped Altar. This rite was conducted so that all could see. Then, all returned to their respective stations.

### **The Reading of the Gospel, the Accidental Fire, and the Ordination of Deacons**

The reading of the Gospel was a new experience for us...for several reasons. First, of course, we heard the Gospel in Coptic. To this day, I have no idea what it was. Second, we Westerners discovered that certain parts of the Coptic Liturgy apparently are somewhat unstructured; the Gospel reading in the Coptic liturgy isn't set, so that the Deacon reading can read as much or as little as he likes. In this case, the Deacon reading was the same exuberant fellow who had, earlier, brought over the Liturgies.

Well, the young Deacon, thrilled to be reading before his Pope, read on. And on. And on. And on. Finally, Pope Shenouda shifted in his Throne and looked around to see if anyone was planning to wind down the Gospel. Apparently not, for the reading continued unabated. Suddenly, the Pope leaned forward and made a rather vigorous, circular “wind it up” motion with his hand, at which another Deacon approached

the reader and attempted to take away the Gospel book. No, absolutely not, the young reader indicated, and he continued reading. There then ensued a tug-of-war between the two Deacons, neither one letting go of the Gospel book, and, all the while, the young Deacon continued reading. Finally, the Gospel book was wrenched away from the reader, and the second Deacon fled with it, perhaps lest it be recaptured and the Gospel continue.

But the unfolding drama wasn't over. During the struggle of the two Deacons, one of them bumped the thurifer, whose thurible was piled with lit charcoals. The bump caused several of the charcoals to tumble upon the rug, which immediately began to smolder and threaten to flame.

Pope Shenouda rolled his eyes and looked around to see who would come forward to snuff the rather considerable smoldering that was now ongoing...but no one came forward. A movement across the room drew my eye, and I beheld the Baroness of Harlek, our own Knight riding to the rescue, holding a vase of water from which she had discarded the flowers. Her plan was obvious: pour the water on the fire. She had almost made it to her destination when one of the Coptic women stepped forward, insisted upon taking the vase, and went to the fire and doused it with the water. The church building was now safe from burning to the ground, thanks to the quick thinking of Baroness Harlek. Shortly thereafter, two men dragged in the rubber door mat to cover the burned wet spot, and the Liturgy continued.

We, at the time, did not consider the episode to be comic, although now, in retrospect, the story is a good one. I learned, later, that Pope Shenouda thought the affair to be rather humorous, although at the time he certainly didn't so indicate!

One mustn't draw the wrong conclusion from the struggle over the Gospel. Clearly, this incident was unique; the whole of the Coptic Liturgy that day was dignified and beautiful, filled with mystery and wonder.

Right after the Gospel came the Ordination of Deacons, and I noticed a considerable lineup of candidates. I noticed something else, too: the Coptic understanding of the Diaconate must be a bit different from ours—the men in the line were getting shorter...and younger. Yes, Pope Shenouda made Deacons of old men, young men, teenage boys, middle school boys, elementary school boys—every male in the line, as long as they were properly vested as Coptic Orthodox Deacons. The very

last male in line to be ordained was a babe in arms...dressed in tiny Deacon's vestments! However, Pope Shenouda drew the line at ordaining nonspeaking infants, so the poor mother was escorted away disappointed.

### **The Lunch Break**

The Liturgy ended around 1 PM, the Coptic Liturgy lasting, typically, four hours. Lunch was excellent (and vegetarian), and we chatted with many of the Copts.

### **The Private Audience with the Pope**

The private audience with the Pope began around 2 PM and consisted of His Holiness, a few of his attendants, Bishop Bishoy, we Knights, and a few others. No women were present. First, the Pope presented me, Baron Harlek, and a select few others with fresh fruit (bananas, actually), which presentation, I learned later, was considered a mark of honor. Then, His Holiness presented us with some of his books on Theology, which he had signed. The ensuing discussions were about theology, the history of the Coptic Church, and some current events. During the discussion, the Pope invited me to visit him at the Papal Palace in Cairo. His Holiness also extended the invitation to Baron Harlek and Chev. Haines, and he emphasized that, because this was his invitation to us, he would assume all expenses. I regret to this day that I did not take up his offer.

The audience lasted about two hours, and we were ushered out so that the Pope could take a well-deserved rest.

We also rested and chatted with many of the Copts and visiting clergy.

### **The Evening Talk to the Young People and a Surprise for Me**

That evening around 6 PM, Coptic young people began assembling in the church, all very excited that the Pope wanted to talk with them...and talk to them, he did! Bishop Bishoy told us that the Pope wanted us to be present for the talk, and I'm glad we were invited. In a very frank manner, His Holiness talked about a young Copt's life in the modern world and about the value of both tradition and modernism. His talk to them about values, ethics, and morals was very well received, and I was surprised at his candor when he spoke to them about sexual

ethics and morality. Yet, I could see that those young people appreciated very much the Pope's candor and advice.

After the "young people's" talk, all the adults and church dignitaries came into the church for final questions and answers and a farewell. At the very end, His Holiness called forward an Orthodox Bishop...and, to my surprise, me! At that time, His Holiness presented us with the honor of the Papal Visitation medal. I, of course, still have the medal, as well as a photograph of the presentation, which you can see, below. Note the surprised expression on my face.



**Pope Shenouda presents the Papal Medal to Prince Lloyd**



**Closeup of the Papal Medal presented to Prince Lloyd**

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## **Our Departure**

Shortly thereafter, our final goodbyes were given, and we left to return to our homes.

The event was a remarkable one for us personally. The Pope and Bishop Bishoy let us know that they felt a kindness and affinity for us. Bishop Bishoy talked to me about the "kindness" and "generosity" of our theology and our efforts to understand, not condemn, other faiths. He said that Pope Shenouda knew that the goodness in our hearts came from our faith, and that he and the Pope wished us well and hoped to see us again.

The Coptic Pope holds many titles: Pope of Alexandria, Dean of the Great Catechetical School of Theology of Alexandria, Ecumenical Judge of the Holy Apostolic and Orthodox Church of God, the Thirteenth

Among the Holy Apostles, and the Pillar and Defender of the Holy Catholic Church and of Orthodox Doctrine. As for me, I believe that the missing title is "Saint." Pope Shenouda was one of the living holy men who bless this planet with their presence. His kindness, understanding, and spiritual power manifested simultaneously. He was truly a remarkable man, a saint in the best Christian tradition.

May God bless Pope Shenouda as he begins the next step in his journey.