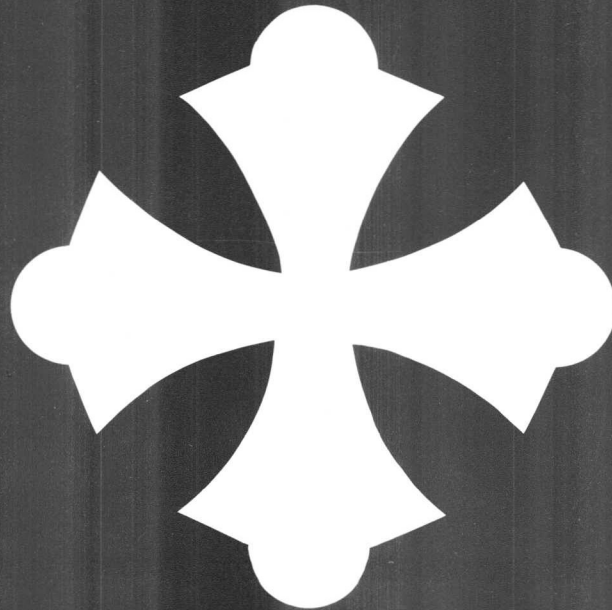


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- *ST. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA*
- *THE ECCLESIASTICAL ROLE OF
THE PEOPLE*
- *CHRIST'S DEATH AND
RESURRECTION IN THE GOSPEL
OF BARNABAS*



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THE ECCLESIASTICAL ROLE OF THE PEOPLE

Father Tadros Y. Malaty

The People (Laos)¹

The word “people” was used in the Old Testament in its wide and inclusive meaning to embrace all the congregation of believers, i.e. priests, Levites and people. They were called “the people of God” to differentiate them from the Gentile peoples. It was also used in its limited meaning of the laymen alone, without the priests or Levites.

In the early Church of Alexandria, the Greek word “Laos” was used sometimes in its inclusive sense meaning the Church of God as a whole, i.e. the clergy, monks and laymen, and other times in the limited sense meaning the laymen alone. The Alexandrian Fathers, who lived with an evangelical and ecclesiastical mind loved and honored the priesthood and experienced monasticism in their angelic life, and at the same time they looked at the laymen as the living church which is ministered by the clergy and for whom the monks, nuns and virgins pray. They did not know of any church classes. The laity is the living church; every member, man or woman, young or old, rich or poor, has a vital and effective role in worship, in practicing the pious life and in witnessing to Christ.

Laity And Priesthood

The main cause of the vitality of the Coptic Church is the true understanding of the relation between the clergy and the laity. The priesthood, in the mind of every Copt, even the child, is a spiritual fatherhood. The clergyman is not an employee who performs certain duties in an institution, but rather he is a true father; his fatherhood cannot be destroyed even by death. Therefore he does not retire from this fatherhood at any age. Through this fatherhood the believer tastes the unique fatherhood of God as well as the motherhood of the Church. Thus he is united with God and with His Church, not through fear or compulsion but through adoption and love.

Through fatherhood, the clergyman acknowledges all the believers as his own family, sharing with them all their occasions. When a child is born the priest along

with the deacons and the members of the household offer prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God (*Prayer of Washing the Babe*). After this the priest baptizes the child in a joyful atmosphere. If he becomes ill the prayers of the sacrament of anointing will be held. When he is in trouble, the Eucharist is offered on his behalf. In the event of death the whole congregation shares in the funeral service and comforts the family by participating in the prayers of the "Third" and "Fortieth" Days and other occasions.

Through this ecclesiastical concept we can elucidate the following points:

1. Priesthood, in the eyes of the Coptic Church, is a fatherhood, love and service and not an authority.² The spiritual clergyman does not indulge in the administrative affairs of the church, but rather gives himself up for his children in the Lord. He never enters into confrontation with the members of the board of deacons but lives with them as their father. They honor him and seek his advice.

2. The clergyman, in his earnest love for his people, feels as one among them who needs their prayers as much as they need his. He gains from their experience, even from the young children, and interacts with all without pride or authoritarianism.

3. The Church of Alexandria emphasizes the right of all the congregation in choosing their clergy.

4. Because of the danger of his role as a spiritual leader, the church laws are more strict and firm in disciplining the clergyman as compared to the layman.

5. In order to preserve his fatherhood in purity and without blemish, it behooves the clergyman to refrain from politics. Thus, he can practice his fatherhood with a purely spiritual mind.

The Positive Role Of The Laity

The church carried two clear models since the early apostolic era: the model of clergy and that of the laymen. However, she lived as an integral and intermingled church that does not know negativity in the life of any of her members. Truly, the bishop had his own work, so were the priests and the deacons. The laity had also a positive role in worship and in witnessing for Christ.

In the Eucharist, the laymen do not just attend worship but participate in it and have their own role. The liturgy is not a worship carried out by the priest on behalf of the people; it is rather the task of all the Church, clergy and laity, for the sanctification of the whole world. If the people just attend without participating in giving thanks and praise, asking or crying to God, the liturgy will lose its true function. Then either the people would be ignorant of their role and give up their place in the Eucharist, or the clergy would deprive the people of their right in the Eucharist, thus spoiling the life of the Church.

The people have the right of positive participation not only in worship but also in preaching and witnessing to the gospel of Christ. In the book of Acts we notice that the people who were scattered and left Jerusalem because of the persecution went about preaching the word (Acts 8:4).

The School of Alexandria emphasized the utilization of the energies of the people for the sake of the kingdom of God. St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen spoke about the "*lay priesthood*" or the "*common priesthood*". Origen states, "Do you not know that the priesthood has been given to you, that is to say, to the whole Church of God, to the believers? Hear Peter say to the faithful, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9). You, then, have the priesthood since you are a priestly race, and so you ought to offer to God a sacrifice of praise (cf. Heb. 13:15), a sacrifice of prayers, a sacrifice of mercy, a sacrifice of purity, a sacrifice of sanctity."³

References

1. Father Malaty, *The Universal Love* (in Arabic), 1985
2. *Is. hom.* 6, PG 12:239.
3. *Levit. hom* 9:1.