

## Journey Back to Eden

(Book Review: Mark Gruber American Benedictine Monk)

*In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

**LEARN:** God chooses things in ways we don't understand, or comprehend. He has goals and ways to expose the Coptic Church to the world. I believe that God had put this Catholic monk in this situation to speak for the Copts.

At his monastery focussed on education and pushed to do his doctorate (PhD) early. Teacher, of all people, picked on him and asked what he was going to write for his thesis. He remembers recently going to the Deans office, and reading about these people called "Copts" in the National Geographic (article on Egypt). So he tells the teacher what he remembers, and says that he will spend a year in the monasteries of Egypt, studying them from an anthropological perspective, i.e. where they live, how they act, and how that is shaped by their environment and history.

**BANG:** God is sending this American Catholic monk to Egypt.

**He goes to Egypt** and spends 3 days waiting for Pope Shenouda to get permission to go to the different monasteries.

Finds out that he hardly has any money because he doesn't know which Bank Misr branch he deposited the money into.

He has to go to a cheap hotel.

The Pope tells him to wear his robes, with a hood, and to grow his beard.

And then sends him to Abouna Matta El-Meskeen. He invites him cordially.

**LEARN:** Even when we see big fights and problems, in realty there is great charity. Look how the Pope sent him to Abouna Matta, even with all the problems.

He spends the next year going to 12 monasteries in Egypt.

This man experiences miracles for the first time in his life.

**LEARN:** We take miracles for granted.

Time was at **1986-1987**. St Mary was appearing at the Zeitoun church. He was told to come. He went into the Church for blessings. As he was coming out, ALL the people, even though he didn't look EXACTLY like a Coptic monk, wanted blessings. Then St Mary appeared outside. So the American monk starts walking to go outside the church to see. When he is close to the door, the man comes in with child, who is blue in the face, the father wants the American monk to bless the child, (strange for American monks), the child actually looks very pale, is not moving, or making a sound, and looks dead. The father is panicking. The father throws the child into the monk's arms, they are near the door, then a gust of wind comes, so he automatically covers the child, when he removes his body and arms, the child's face was red, and she was crying and moving. The father

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starts crying and all the men and women start screaming that “Abouna” has made a miracle, and all the women do zagaraht!

**LEARN:** The simple and deep faith of the Coptic people is appreciated by the outsiders.

Incident happened when he was at a monastery, and a bus of Copts came for a stay over (which he was amazed at). And all the children came to him, and he went outside the walls, sitting in the desert with them. And they kept asking him questions about our Lord Jesus, and St Mary, and all the saints, and stories, until all of them were either sleeping in his lap, or around him.

When he saw that the children loved the Church, and loved the Bible, he saw this greater again than the American attitude. If these were American children, they would have been bored after 15 minutes, but these children kept HIM for hours.

**LEARN:** Our BORING, OLD, TRADITIONAL Coptic faith has the youth by their ears!!!!

The American had to make a stop over from the monasteries at Cairo. He took the time to go to one of the Pope’s weekly meetings. He was AMAZED that EVERY week, the Pope can fill the Cathedral...EVERY WEEK. And the American was even more amazed about the Pope’s answer to even the most touchy questions...SO TRADITIONAL. And when he would finish, the youth would cheer wildly for him, and stand. So amazed! American youth would find him backwards and his next talk would be only for a few people. The Americans look to more relaxed beliefs, and rules, and practices, while these Coptic people WANT to be rigid and firm.

**LEARN:** He saw how the Moslems go to the Christian clergy to remove evil spirits. But a Christian does not believe it is ok to go to a Muslim. Even without realising, they are saying that the name of our God, Jesus Christ, is greater than the God of Mohammed.

He is accosted in the street by two Moslem brothers. They tell him that their father died recently, and that there is something wrong in the house. HE FINDS THIS BIZARE. A friend tells him that “A Muslim sheikh deals directly with God, so the evil spirits must be dealt with by a lesser religion”!!!!

He goes to their house, prays on water and blesses the house, prays CHRISTIAN PRAYERS, and then they are so happy, and feel that there is no more evil spirit. And they LOVE him.

**LEARN:** There is something to the length of our Liturgies.

Whilst staying at one of the monasteries, the Coptic monks asked him if they could watch him whilst he performed a mass. (The catholic priest is allowed to pray the mass by himself). This was after he had seen the LONG Coptic style liturgies. So he decided to

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give the monks the super duper, extra long mass with all the toppings. When he finished, the monks were upset and said that they only JUST started to get into it, and feel spiritually uplifted. The American was shocked, he had just SUNG every part (not normal) and ALL the extra bits, and ALL the extra songs and STRECHED it out for 1.5 hours.

**LEARN:** Faith is something which must stay with you, even at the WORST times.

The American attended a monastery that was in the south of Egypt, and he came in the middle of a massive heat wave, VERY HOT and HUMID, and the water that the monks drank was disgusting. The monastery was like a furnace. The abbot of the monastery told a very old monk to take the American to the cave of the founder of the monastery (a saint). The walk was a few hours. Only after half-an-hour, the American became very tired, and dizzy, he had drunk all the water. After a while the American thought that God, or the monk, had brought him out into the desert to die. He could hear the old man saying something, and thought that certainly the monk was complaining or cursing. When he got closer, he found the monk singing praises to God. WHAT!!! CRAZY!!!! HE IS MAD!!! Then the American was walking and a rock JUST flew over his head and landed a few metres in front of him. He thought for sure now the monk is crazy, and is trying to kill him by throwing rocks at his head. Then when he continued walking he found that under the rock was a scorpion, the old monk had just saved his life. When they got to the cave, it was actually on the top of a large, steep hill. There was a rope and you literally had to climb up the mountain side. The old monk was SOOO quick, and this young, American monk took FOREVER, and really struggled.

Once they FINALLY made it. Guess what. Inside it was a full 20 degrees cooler and deep in the cave was several pots full of fresh, clean, water. The old monk left and the American stayed for several days till the heat wave was over, thanking God that these Egyptian monks had pity on him, and that the God of all cares for everyone.

**LEARN:** The outside of the church may change, but not the inside.

There is a story in the book, Sayings of the Desert Fathers (1500-1700 years old), where a person came and gave grapes to one of the monks at a monastery (grapes being a great delicacy in Egypt), then this monk gave the basket to another, without taking a grape, and this monk did the same, until it came around the next day to him, with not one grape taken.

So it was with the American, he was given a plate of grapes by one of the fathers, and he gave it to a monk who was taking care of him, until after the next day, the plate came back to him, still full of the same grapes, not one of them eaten!!!! So he had actually had the SAME experience as he read about from 1700 years ago!

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### CONCLUSION

A story is not great by how it makes you feel, but by how you change because of it.

This is what change in me, and made me appreciate my Coptic church so much more.

The American monks observations, and things he actually loved about Coptic spirituality (THAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED), I really hated, like going all spastic when the Pope comes, or making sure that we MUST get blessings from a priest if we walk pass, we MUST touch his shoulder, kiss the cross, his hand....something.

The people love to take blessings and the monks and priests will give. This is actually, in his view, a great sign of love, that American youth do not do (i.e. Catholic/Protestant).

Its funny, I used to think it was stupid and dramatic. But I can now see that this is because we have true faith and we love. Like those who had faith just to touch the clothes of our Lord, and they would be healed.

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The religion of the Egyptians is such that everything is seen through the eyes of religion, wether it be money, happiness, fate, the future, work, and marriage, anything about life. The Copts of Egypt rely on God with GREAT faith, while I, the Westerner, rely on myself, and my brain, and the latest article in a magazine, or a book, and only think of God as the last option.

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The depth of Coptic prayers, masses, beliefs, ideology, everything. The American SO wished that he could take it back to America, and he did. His experience in Egypt completely changed his monastic life, and the way he viewed monasticism.

Many of us, we wish we said less prayers, had less fasts, shorter masses, were more flexible with our beliefs, not so focussed on theology and belief. Yet this is what makes our faith REALLY strong. More is more, less is less. In this, less is not more.

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The American misses Egypt so much, and really felt like it was his home. The Coptic Church is my home, and I will never forget it.

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### THE BLESSING FOR THE COPTS

Because of this book written by a non-Coptic person, the Copts will gain respect and attention, especially to the plight of our brothers and sisters in Egypt, who struggle so much.

This book, on Amazon.com where I bought it, not ONE person gave it a bad rating (out of 19 ratings). I have never seen this before. Everyone gave it 5 out of 5 and some 4 out of 5. The life of the Copts is amazing and people feel it. It is really something wonderful.

**Glory is to God, forever. Amen.**