



Claremont's Scholars and Students of Religion Visit Egypt

The tour of Coptic Egypt was outstanding, better even than we could have possibly imagined. The students are now assembling a web page with their photos and blogs of the trip. We are already planning next year's trip; this one was so successful.

For many students the visit to the Coptic Museum was the highlight, they were astounded at the richness and antiquity of the Coptic heritage and impressed by the connections to the Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Muslim and Ottoman cultures in which Coptic Christianity flourished.

At least that was the highlight until the audience with His Holiness Pope Shenouda. Thanks to Dr Tharwat Bassily who had organised that. Even with the Pope's health problems the entire group was invited. We were formally received at the Pope's residence. Two TV channels were there filming and afterwards several of us gave interviews, students and administrators alike, on what had been the most moving moments of our trip. After the round of formal welcomes and greetings the Pope opened a conversation with the students. As they asked him questions on how to face the unique challenges of this new century, **he became the Pope and pastor for all of us sharing with us store of wisdom. The students were deeply moved by His Holiness. All of us were so grateful to his love, teaching, wisdom, and the opportunity of having an audience with him.** We took a group photo (above) with His Holiness surrounded by Claremont's Deans, professors and students of religion. To his right stood Her Excellency Dr Sallama Shaker, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Egypt and Visiting Professor of political science at Claremont Graduate University (CGU); followed by Prof. Karen Torjesen, Dean, School of Religion, CGU; Prof. Susan Nelson, Dean, Claremont School of Theology; and Engineer Samir Mitry who generously made the group feel welcome in Egypt. To the Pope's left was Dr Tharwat Bassily, Deputy Chair of the General Community Council; Dr Gawdat Gabra, Visiting Professor of Coptic Studies at CGU; H.G. Bishop Yoannes, and H.G. Bishop Yohana.

We flew back from Luxor on Coptic Christmas, after getting up at 5:00am to visit the Valley of the Kings. It made for a long day, but even with that at 9:00pm that night we had a group of 12 who accepted Dr Bassily's invitation and attended the divine liturgy in St Mary Church (Ard al-Golf) Heliopolis. Imagine our surprise at being met by a group of English speaking young people who translated for us. We were given prayer books in English and welcomed formally from the pulpit. Then the most extraordinary part was that a portion of the lit-

urgy was sung in English. We were deeply honoured to be there and it was the perfect introduction to what lies at the heart of Coptic art and architecture, the beauty of the liturgy chanted in its ancient rhythms. It was a Christmas we will never forget. It was a special gift from Dr Bassily for which we are thankful.

Mr Samir Mitry worked tirelessly to make us feel welcome in Egypt. We talked often during the trip, but he truly overwhelmed us the night he hosted us at the Diplomat's Club which had once been a palace of the king. We were so moved and honoured to be his guests and to dine in that historic, beautiful place.

The last days of our tour took us to Sinai. Late at night we arrived in the cold at the base of St Catherine's. A few hours later at 1:00am we were summoned from fragments of sleep for our climb up Mt Sinai. Some on camel, some on foot, bobbing flash lights marking the trail as it laced up the side of the mountain, we all forgot the bitter cold in the beauty and magic of the night. The dome of the sky held a million stars, a hush fell among the pilgrims, the cries of camel drivers was low, it was a sacred place and a sacred moment. Together we watched sunrise pierce the darkness.

Finally on the last day of our tour we reached the monastery of St Anthony in the inner desert. Such a long important history flows from this simple place (it is quite a contrast to the imperial wealth of St Catherine's), which made me love it all the more. St Anthony indeed seems present. **We had a wonderful, quiet and reflective time at St Anthony's and there we began to understand that the monasteries are the source of the strength and endurance of the Coptic Church.**

As one of our fellow travellers put it, what made this trip different from any other was the leadership of Dr Gawdat Gabra. His passion for all things Coptic and Egyptian and his marvellous lectures on each site gave us insights that would otherwise have taken years to gain. Everywhere we went we encountered Egyptian hospitality, but most especially from the bishops, abbots, monks, priests and laity who received us in the papal residence, monasteries and churches. We are also indebted to them. Ambassador Sallama Shaker accompanied us on these important visits which she had helped to facilitate. We are indeed grateful to all of them.

Professor Karen J. Torjesen is Dean of the School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University (www.cgu.edu).