

Journey Back to Eden Reflection

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In *Journey Back to Eden*, Mark Gruber shares his diary from a year spent with Coptic Christians in Egypt. He spent this time as an academic completing his field research for his doctoral dissertation in anthropology. As he did this field research, it turned out to be impossible for him to remain at any impartial academic distance from the subjects of his study. While it is possible that this may have hampered the strictly academic nature of his research, after reading his journal and reflections, it is undeniable that his life as a Christian and his vocation as a monk following in the footsteps of the men he was to study, albeit the western and American interpretation of it, was deepened, strengthened, and broadened. This reflection will briefly discuss his growth, both in personal spirituality and in his understanding of this ancient part of the Christian world, over the time he spent studying the Coptic Church in Egypt.

His initial arrival in Egypt included a mistake in his understanding of the state banks of the country that cost him most of his travel budget for the greater part of his visit. It seems likely that if he had not been thrust into living in the beggarly manner of the Coptic monks of the desert, depending on God and others for nearly his every need, he would have remained far more an outsider both in his understanding and sympathy to the Coptic Church and to the desert monks themselves. Instead, he became one of them in every way available to him, and, in the end, he was accepted as one of them, as the Isaac to Abuna Elia in his own twilight years (Gruber, 204), and he was even implicitly invited to stay by Pope Shenoudah III (Gruber, 157). It is telling that, as he closes his reflections, Gruber does not look at the Egyptian desert as “utterly foreign” (Gruber, 9), but it rather seems to be more home than his own community of Benedictine monks. It seems providential to his relationship with the monks and spiritual growth at large that his funds ended up available to him only for that portion of his trip that could be described as more tourist than

pilgrimage in some way: his visit to Israel. If one is open to it, it is not difficult to see God's hand at work in arranging things such that Gruber would have his needs met throughout the visit, but, at the same time, in that portion that he was to spend among the desert monks, Gruber would be forced to engage in their lifestyle without the possibility of easy escape. It seems that, had he not started his travels in Egypt like this, his journey up the mountain to recover in a desert cave would have been, not only rife with grumbling, but actually impossible and a curse upon him.

Several aspects of Gruber's time in Egypt seem to show parallels to the instructions that were given by Saint Benedict for Gruber's own order, but are no longer followed. It is clear that Gruber, in his time in Egypt, grew in respect for the monastic culture that was the parent of his own, and has remained, through the centuries, more true to the austerity of its ideals than has been possible in many expressions of the Order of Saint Benedict in the west. His observations of that fact seem to culminate in his reflection on the abbot of the Monastery of Saint Samuel. In that monastery, the abbot actively discourages men from joining the community. Gruber recalls that Saint Benedict calls for similar reluctance to allow any man to enter the monastery. However, even though Gruber does not take significant note of the fact, even his early days trying to get an audience with Pope Shenoudah reflect the entry of a postulant into a monastery following a strict reading of Saint Benedict's rule. Just as Gruber had to spend days waiting in the lobby for an audience with the Coptic patriarch (Gruber, 11-15), Benedict called for a man who wished to join the community of monks to spend days knocking at the door before he should be allowed to enter (RB, 58). While, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, one could interpret the reference to knocking at the door as symbolic, it seems apropos to read it as, at the very least, a symbol of what Gruber underwent as he tried to gain access to the monks in the desert for his

research. Both of these examples can be seen to shine further light on the spiritual life. Just as perseverance and patience are required to join Benedict's order of monks or to gain an audience with the patriarch of the Coptic church, they are essential to growth and health of the spiritual life despite the promises that are made by some contemporary programs and systems that promise instant or near-instant spiritual gratification.

Throughout his reflections, Gruber notes many differences between the western expression of Christianity in the Catholic Church and that he encountered among the Coptic monks. Most notably, the time spent in prayer was extreme in these desert monasteries. Gruber notes on several occasions the difference between the reaction of the time spent in prayer and in the liturgy there and the time spent in the United States. Whereas, in the United States, the culture is so tied to time and brevity that if a Mass should extend beyond an hour, the parishioners, indeed many monastic communities, would be near riot, in Egypt, the typical liturgy was several hours in duration. Gruber even notes that, when he was asked to celebrate a Latin Rite Mass for a few of the Coptic Monks so they could experience his tradition, they were disconcerted at its brevity, even though he stretched it in every way he could think of to approximately an hour and a half. Gruber notes that one of them "exclaimed to [him] how he was just beginning to enter into the spirit of the Mass when it was over" (Gruber, 22). Another difference that was striking was Gruber's observations regarding the journey through the Psalter in his own and the Coptic tradition. Among the Coptic monks, all 150 Psalms are recited each day; in the Latin Rite, the full course of the psalms takes a month.

Several of the stories that Gruber shares as he reflects on his time, especially those that show his increasing acceptance among the community show the generosity that is natural to the Copts and to the culture of the desert in general. This is a charity and

generosity of self that is meant to be connatural to a Christian as he grows in virtue, but is, all too often, the exception in the western secularized expression of the faith in America. Some of the stories that he tells that stand out in this illustration are his discussion of the gift of grapes that traveled around the entire monastery before being finally regifted to him as raisins (Gruber, 33-34). Granted, it is uncertain if these were the actual grapes that began their rounds of the monastery, but it seems that, in that environment, the grapes could easily have been desiccated in the time that it took them to pass through each member of the community before they returned to Gruber. The other story that gives rise to reflection does not involve the Coptic monks at all; indeed, it likely does not involve Christians. That story is his encounter with the Bedouin nomads who are willing to share their entire stock of bread with him to express their hospitality and generosity to this stranger with whom they have no connection and to whom they owe nothing (Gruber, 190-192). Gruber takes this opportunity to reflect briefly on the tradition of breaking bread as it has been received in Christianity. Gruber notes that, in the desert heat and dryness, and lacking modern conveniences to preserve food, bread is unusable within hours of being broken, so the act of breaking bread is a truly selfless act by his host and understood as such in Near Eastern culture. It seems noteworthy that this takes on an even deeper understanding when one reflects on the oft-used word 'companion.' Etymologically, a companion is one with whom a person breaks and eats bread. Gruber reflects that, just as his Bedouin host held nothing back from him in breaking all of his bread before him, "nothing has been kept back from us by God. Nothing has been withheld, and all has been generously supplied" (Gruber, 192). Gruber does not add that, in this story, he has, in the truest sense, become a companion to this Bedouin with whom he will likely never again interact. It seems noteworthy that, in this, the Christian West has been shown by one

lacking the graces of baptism the true meaning of Christ's admonition that we should love and care for the least of our brothers.

The last aspect of his journey through Coptic monasticism that this reflection will discuss is the dynamic between contemplative and active monastic life and between eremitic and cenobitic monks, a dynamic that is perceived as tension between opposed approaches or forces in much of the west, but is received as complementary in the lives of these desert monks. Throughout the book, Gruber notes on several occasions the dynamic between these monks who would clearly be strictly contemplative in western terms and the pilgrims who regularly visit to seek blessings; Gruber describes many of these interactions as a sort of choreography in which the pilgrims have to capture the monks to demand blessings. Even the monks who have withdrawn to live as hermits expect pilgrims to come to their hermitages to demand blessings or a word. Gruber relates a story of one Abuna Mina el Muttawahad, the Solitary, who spent extended time in the caves of the desert and make frequent forays into the villages or cities to preach then return to the desert (Gruber, 34). That is to say, in many ways, the life of the contemplative was seen, in some way, as active and apostolic; the contemplative life gave depth and strength for apostolic ministry. In the same way, one of the monks explained to Gruber that even the most eremitic of monks were living a life of community. In the Coptic understanding, the monk lives a life of community centered on and revolving around Christ and the Coptic worship; this is true whether the monk is living alone in a cave or among a monastic community, he is a member of a community. This is even more apparent when one reflects on the return of Abuna Elia to the monastery because of his advanced age. The only apparent exception to this rule is the wandering *sowha*. However, even they are connected to the community by virtue of their connection to Christ in the mind of the Copts.

In short, Gruber's reflections from his time in the desert serve to both introduce the reader to the world of Coptic monasticism that is alien to the western Catholic mind. It also serves to highlight some of the traditions that the Catholic Church could learn from this enclave of Christians who have held fast to ancient customs that have long since vanished in the West.