

Leadership and Intellectual Humility in the Coptic Orthodox Church: Bishop Athanasius of Beni Suef (1962-2000) and the Papal Committee

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of intellectual humility in the context of religious and communal leadership within the Coptic Orthodox Church, the indigenous Church of Egypt. The focus is on the strategies employed by Athanasius, the Bishop of Beni Suef and Bahnasa (1962- 2000) during a period of inner Coptic strife caused by the existence of the so-called Papal Committee (1981 to 1985). The root of the conflict was a head-on collision of ideas between the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012) and President Sadat (1970-1981) that resulted in the Pope being banned to a remote desert monastery. One of the main arguments in this essay is that the character trait called “intellectual humility” was foundational to Athanasius’ leadership style and instrumental in saving the Coptic Church from being torn apart by inner conflicts.

KEY WORDS: Coptic Orthodox Church, Bishop Athanasius, Pope Shenouda, Religious Leadership, Intellectual Humility

*“What makes me a bishop is helping the handicapped and the elderly.”
Anba Athanasius*

Introduction

In this essay I explore the concept of intellectual humility within the context of religious and communal leadership in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the indigenous Church of Egypt.² I am especially trying to understand what made the leadership style of Athanasius, the Bishop of Beni Suef and Bahnasa (1962 -2000) unique and effective, especially during a period of intense strife within the Church. He was among the Church’s most influential

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² In the rest of this article I will use the term Coptic Church when referring to the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, there also exists a Coptic Catholic Church and a Coptic Evangelical Church in Egypt.

and respected leaders yet until today remains largely unknown, even within Coptic circles. I am particularly interested in the manner in which he handled the internal conflicts within the Coptic Church during the time of the so-called Papal Committee (1981 to 1985) which is still a vivid part of Coptic memory. Athanasius chaired the contentious Committee for most of its existence. Yet, while the sheer existence of the Committee led to inner Coptic discord, it never exploded into a cycle of long-lasting public feuds between Bishop Athanasius and the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012). In fact, until the very end of his life, Athanasius managed to maintain cordial relationships between him, the Pope, and other individuals and groups who criticised him for his role in the Papal Committee.

When looking at Athanasius' leadership strategies, my guiding question is, "What were the specific characteristics and character traits that made this bishop stand out in comparison to his peers, especially in times of strife and adversity?" During his lifetime he was seen as nothing less than an exemplary Church leader and deeply admired for his piety, wisdom, and humility. However, so were his peers, the most famous of whom was his nemesis Pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012).

While religious leadership differ from other forms of leadership, for example from leadership models in the world of business and not-for-profit organisations (NGO's), there is much overlap. Nowadays, as the research about what makes an effective leader is exploding, we can apply multiple results from publications probing these questions from the vantage point of psychological, sociological, neuroscience and management research models to religious leadership issues. Building on the growing research about the character trait of humility, one of my main arguments is that the trait called "intellectual humility" was foundational to Athanasius' leadership style and saved the Coptic Church from being torn apart by inner conflicts during a period that started at the end of the 1970s and ended in 1985. Before I elaborate on this conflict, let me introduce the concept of intellectual humility; the lynchpin of this essay's argument.

Humility *Vis-À-Vis* Intellectual Humility

In psychological research, humility has been identified as a trait that involves (a) an accurate or moderate view of one's strengths and weaknesses as well as being, and (b) interpersonally other-oriented rather than self-focused, marked by the ability to restrain egotism in ways that maintain social acceptance.³ Egotism in this context refers to self-oriented emotions such as pride or shame.⁴

Being a Bishop, Athanasius was well-acquainted with the concept of humility. In the Coptic Church, Bishops are chosen from among the monks whose life centres on practising this virtue. Of course, Jesus serves as the prime example; among others, he washed the disciples' feet and freely relinquished his own station and dignity to be crucified. The Bible, the New as well as the Old Testament, is furthermore filled with exhortations that we should become like children and live in a spirit of humility. A central text is in the book of Luke: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."⁵ Humility is seen as the true antidote

³ Davis, D.E., Hook, J.N., etc. "Relational Humility:"225-234.

⁴ Stacey E. McElroy, etc. "Intellectual Humility:" 20.

⁵ Luke 14: 11 and 18:14, New Revised Standard Version. See: Mathew the Poor, *Communion*, ch. 5, "The Righteousness of Humility."

against arrogance or spiritual pride. It bursts the bubble of arrogance; “the counterfeit image of puffed-up thought.”⁶ Saint Benedict (480-547 CE), the founding father of Western monasticism, considered the virtue so central that he divided its practice into a twelve-step programme that served as a ladder for monks to reach the highest possible level of the monastic life.⁷

However acute awareness of the centrality of the virtue of humility, is not sufficient for the formation of effective leaders. They seem to have a specific form of humility that cannot be acquired just by years of practice but is an inborn trait. This form of humility has been identified as intellectual humility; it pertains to one’s knowledge or intellectual influence, understanding the limits of one’s knowledge, marked by openness to new ideas. It also involves regulating arrogance, as well as the ability to present one’s ideas in a non-offensive manner and receive contrary ideas without taking offence.

Intellectual humility is especially pertinent anytime there is a competition or negotiation of ideas in a relationship or group and allows one to leverage trust in order to form and strengthen relationships.⁸ It has been called the social oil that makes communities thrive and can prevent conflict in the same way as oil is important to keep the engine running and keeps it from overheating.⁹ Needless to say that intellectual humility seems an important virtue for religious leaders; while their influence over communities relies on their connection to the Divine, they are expected to model the messages they preach.

Coptic Church Reform

In order to understand the events discussed in this article, a brief introduction to some key moments in Coptic history is called for. The year 1918, when the Sunday School Movement was launched officially, is considered to be the starting point of what is now considered to be the revival of the Coptic Church. Pope Shenouda, Bishop Athanasius, and other influential leaders of their generation were all among the architects of the Sunday school programmes that eventually strengthened, reformed, and revived the Coptic Church.

Pope Kyrillos VI (1959-1971), who is considered to be one of the most influential and saintly popes of the Coptic modern era,¹⁰ selected the best and the brightest of these Sunday school leaders and placed them in key leadership positions. Shenouda and Athanasius were part of a group of highly educated “young rebels” that emerged during the 1950s and steered the Coptic Church into the 21st century.

Athanasius and Shenouda had met during the 1940s at Cairo University and both were spiritual sons of Pope Kyrillos VI and had been monks in the same monastery; the Monastery of the Syrians. When Kyrillos ordained them Bishop in 1962, he had handpicked each of them for their visionary ideas and strong leadership skills. Shenouda

⁶ Vivian, *Journeying*, p. 81.

⁷ Meisel & Mastro, *The Rule*, p. 56-61.

⁸ Stacey E. McElroy, etc. “Intellectual Humility,” 20.

⁹ Joshua N. Hook, etc. “Intellectual humility and forgiveness:” 499-506.

¹⁰ June 20, 2013, the Holy Synod of the Coptic Church canonised Pope Kyrillos VI and Habib Guirguis (d. 1951), both major figures in the revival of the Coptic Church. Middle East Institute Editor’s Blog, June 20, 2013.

became the Bishop of Christian Education while Athanasius was put in charge of the Bishopric of Beni Suef, a town surrounded by hundreds of villages some 110 miles south of Cairo.

A third influential Coptic leader and prominent actor in the Papal Committee who needs to be mentioned in this context is Bishop Samuel (1962-1981). He was ordained Bishop for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services in 1962. Among others, he has been credited with founding the Coptic Church outside Egypt which resulted in a rapidly growing number of Coptic communities in Europe, North America, Australia and numerous countries in Africa, Asia, and South America.¹¹ Samuel was shot by Islamic extremists on October 6, 1981, at the same time as President Sadat was murdered. He was sitting behind the President while watching a military parade.¹² Athanasius and Samuel were deeply intertwined where it concerned their vision for the Coptic Church. In their view, apart from its religious and spiritual duties, the Church should pay attention to social issues such as poverty, sickness, and the lack of education. As a result, they became pioneers of social services and developmental work in Egypt, not just for the Copts but for the entire nation.¹³

After Shenouda was elected Pope, some cracks started to appear in the cordial relations between him and the two Bishops. Shenouda had won when a blindfolded boy picked his name from a vase holding the names of the three candidates who had gained the most votes. However, Samuel had been the most popular of the three candidates, gathering far more votes than Shenouda to the point where some speculated that this popularity irked Shenouda.¹⁴ Initially the differences in their respective vision about the life of the Church did not greatly affect the cooperation between Athanasius, Samuel and the Pope. In fact, their strong personalities and opinions led to healthy disagreements and often the Pope would change his mind and yield to his peers. (Interview with Bishop Athanasius, Beni Suef, February 19, 1998).

¹¹ Of the 128 bishops of the Coptic Orthodox Holy Synod, 32 are in charge of immigration and missionary communities. For the entire list see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Synod_of_the_Coptic_Orthodox_Church.

¹² For the attack and an explanation what evolved see: “Assassination of Anwar El Sadat.” Accessed October 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhu-YgCyPz4>.

¹³ This essay is part of a larger project that aims at recapturing a recent period in Coptic history that is known to all Copts, yet has yielded few academic and non-academic writings. Especially where it concerns the work and lives of Samuel and Athanasius many particulars elude us. In fact, after his death, Samuel’s legacy was nearly erased from Coptic history. One of the reasons I focus on Bishop Athanasius is that I had known him since 1986 and witnessed several moments in his career where he applied the approach that has now been identified as intellectually humble. When writing my dissertation on the Coptic nuns I frequently visited the nunnery he had founded and met and spoke with him numerous times. Within the Coptic context his cordial reception of a non-Coptic (at the time) unmarried woman was remarkable. Following Egyptian cultural mores, few of the other bishops would spend time with me alone or be engaged in a frank exchange of ideas and opinions. As I realised later, Athanasius seemed completely oblivious to gender, status or ethnicity. He just accepted me and everybody else for who we were. Over the years we kept in touch, and towards the end of his life he granted me several interviews in which he talked about his vision, not only for Egypt and the Coptic Church, but for humanity. It was during those meetings that we discussed the issue of the Papal Committee. For my book on the nuns, see: van Doorn-Harder, Pieternella, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*.

¹⁴ For a full description of the procedure to elect a Coptic pope see: Saad, Riegels & Westbrook, “Traditions.”

Church and Politics

Kyrillos' reign coincided with that of President Gamal Abdal Nasser (1954-1970) whose socialist reform agenda had led to the confiscation of farmlands that had hit the Copts particularly hard as many had been land owners. Another policy of Nasser that directly affected the Copts was his pan-Arab ideology that understood Arab nations to be unified by the Arabic language and Islamic history. As a result, public school curricula became Arabised and infused with the study of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood started to work their way through society and awaken a renewed sense of religiosity in the Muslim population with as a side effect the emergence of radical groups. Throughout the 1960s, religio-political tensions grew and strife between the Copts and the Muslims increased.

When Anwar al-Sadat became the President in 1970, he tried to consolidate his constituencies; among others, by courting Islamist groups. Islam became Sadat's tool for political mobilisation with as a result that during the late 1970s Islamist influence on society increased. Mass media and mosque pulpits became filled with radical voices promoting intolerance of non-Muslims, and peddling conspiracy theories about the Copts who were accused of plotting to destroy Egypt. As a result, sectarian clashes between Muslims and Christians accelerated exponentially.¹⁵

Sadat tried to stem the tide of rising violence by introducing several regulations that were disadvantageous to the Copts. Since the actions of militant Muslim groups against the Copts were often tacitly condoned by the President, Pope Shenouda's protests became increasingly outspoken. He confronted Sadat openly, accusing the President of failing to protect Egypt's Christian population. At times he also refused to cooperate with the President's political agenda which aggravated the President.

May 1980, in a final attempt to appease militant Muslim groups, Sadat convinced the government to accept a constitutional amendment which made the principles of sharia, or Islamic law, the basic source of legislation rather than one of several sources of law. This move *de facto* meant that Egypt became a state ruled by Islamic law in which Christians were reduced to the status of *dhimmi*; secondary citizens. This status had been abolished since 1856. In an address to Parliament that month, the President insulted Shenouda by stating that, "the Pope must understand that I am the Muslim President of a Muslim country."¹⁶ The escalating situation put Shenouda even more on the defence with moderate Bishops urging the Pope to tone down his rhetoric.¹⁷

The Papal Committee (1981-1985)

The fifth of September, 1981, in the midst of severe political and religious tensions, the conflict between Sadat and Shenouda exploded. As a result, cordial relationships also

¹⁵ About this period in Egyptian history, see among others, Ansari, "Sectarian Conflict," Fawzi. *Al-Baba Shanuda*, 123-128. S.S.Hasan. *Christians versus Muslims*, 108-113, and Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 220-221.

¹⁶ Farah. *Religious Strife*, 10-13.

¹⁷ Copts consider to be among Sadat's most grievous policies the introduction of the Islamic penal code for apostasy. This code affected the Copts since it made it punishable by death if a Copt who had converted to Islam wished to return to their original faith. Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder, *The Emergence*, 162.

broke down between Shenouda and Athanasius. Sadat detained 1,536 of his opponents and placed the Pope under house arrest in the Monastery of St. Bishoy where he ended up staying for 1,213 days. Sadat wanted to dethrone the Pope and replace him with a candidate of his own choice. Numerous Coptic prelates, among whom Athanasius, Samuel, and Father Matta al-Miskin, the famous abbot of the St. Macarius Monastery, hurried to the presidential palace to convince the President that this move was unprecedented in Egyptian history and forbidden by the Church's Canon Law: the Coptic Pope was elected for life. They convinced the President that not one of the senior clergy would be prepared to replace their Pope. After much deliberation, Sadat allowed a compromise and formed an interim committee (1981-1985) that would take on the Pope's responsibilities.¹⁸ Shenouda rejected the Committee and its sheer existence led to an outright war between the Pope and its five members; two of whom were Samuel and Athanasius.

After sending the Pope into exile, Sadat ordered the Bishops who had disagreed with Shenouda's approach to take a seat in the Papal Committee. He appointed Samuel as Chair, a position filled by Athanasius after Samuel was killed. The Committee's history is complicated and many of the details have gone to the grave with its members. The willingness of the five Bishops to serve was motivated by their fear that the tensions between the Church and the government might generate an Islamist backlash. The committee members never questioned the reality that Shenouda was their Pope. And during what Copts call the period of the "infamous forty months," they commuted between Cairo and the monastery to discuss policies with the Pope. To keep the Pope abreast of Church matters, much of their time was consumed by travelling on dusty roads and applying for permits to visit their leader who, after all, in the view of government officials was a prisoner.

The Pope's banishment infuriated many Copts and especially the communities outside Egypt hurled bitter accusations at the committee members.¹⁹ Until very recently some considered Bishop Samuel's death as a form of divine retribution for having had the audacity to attend the ceremony. Under normal circumstances the Pope should have been there and attending in his place was seen as an act of treason.

Hosni Mubarak succeeded Sadat and relations between the Pope and the government improved. January 1985 Shenouda was set free and allowed to celebrate the Christmas mass in the Coptic cathedral on January 6. The committee was disbanded and the Bishops returned to their usual tasks but not without consequences. They had become *personae non gratae*, including Father Matta al-Miskin who had been instrumental in the formation of the committee. His books were banned from papal libraries and bookstores and a feud of the pen unfolded between the Pope and Matta al-Miskin that ended with al-Miskin's death on June 8, 2006. The legacy of Bishop Samuel was virtually erased. The Pope ordered the deacon in charge of Samuel's personal and clerical files to hand them all over. They subsequently disappeared. It was not until the year 2015 that a group called The Friends of Anba Samuel discovered that a deacon had made copies. Bishop Athanasius endured several years of private and public humiliation; a topic that I will return to shortly.

¹⁸ The common opinion is that it was Father Matta al-Miskin, the abbot of the St. Macarius Monastery who convinced Sadat to put a committee in place. Rumour has it that the President wanted Matta al-Miskin to replace Shenouda. See some of the posthumous memoirs of Matta el-Miskin: *Abuna al-qummu Matta al-Miskin*, 57, 58.

¹⁹ See: Watson, *Among the Copts*, 72-92 & Reiss, Wolfram. *Erneuerung*, 304-306.

Bishop Athanasius (1923-2000)

In order to understand Athanasius' mindset and vision on life we need to consider some moments in his biography that influenced his career as a Church leader, including the long time before he was ordained a Bishop. In fact, in my view where he grew up and how he spent his youth greatly influenced his actions as an adult, especially when it came to practising forms of intellectual humility.

A Village Childhood

Bishop Athanasius was born in 1923 in the provincial town of El-Mahalla al-Kubra, seventy-five miles north of Cairo.²⁰ The town was famous for its textile industry. The opening of a large cotton cloth mill in 1927 had triggered a local industrial revolution as the new method of weaving superseded the domestic handloom. Situated in the fertile Nile delta, the town was also an agricultural centre. The Bishop grew up on his parents' farm in a village on the edge of town. They lived off the produce from their vegetable garden along with the milk and meat from a few cows, goats, sheep, and eggs from their chickens. Their main source of income was a twenty-acre plot where they grew cotton for the textile mills. His childhood was a happy one, and during the rare moments he could steal for a chat and a cup of coffee, the Bishop fondly remembered his parents, siblings and the house he grew up in. It had two floors with a pantry on the ground floor where vats of dried fava beans were stored. Mashed fava beans have been a staple Egyptian food for as long as people can remember; according to a saying, "Beans even satisfied the Pharaohs." They are cheap and nutritious and, when stored properly, last a long time. As a child, one of the Bishop's chores had been to help store them. Climbing into the large vat, the children had to put all their weight on the beans and press them down until they were airtight, and bugs could find no spaces to feast. The beans taught him that small actions can have big consequences; a family could starve if their dried goods became unfit for human consumption.

His parents often hosted guests; Christian as well as Muslim. Most of the children in the neighbourhood, and most of his friends were Muslim. They stayed for dinner and regularly spent the night. The house was often filled with guests; uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and travellers who stopped by for rest and food. In good times and in bad times, there was always enough. Sometimes the harvests failed, and servings were smaller, but nobody left hungry. Throughout his career the Bishop was as popular among the Muslims in his Diocese as he was among the Christians. While close to some of Egypt's most volatile areas that were rife with interreligious strife, Beni Suef on the whole remained quiet during his time in office.

Athanasius' parents were deeply religious and never distinguished between Christians and Muslims; they never judged people but accepted them for who they were. While respecting those in power and higher offices, at home they did not care for strict hierarchies based on wealth or public office. Most of all, sharing with anyone less fortunate was essential to practising their faith. From everything they harvested, picked, or found, his father would take one tenth and distribute it among the needy. The family motto was that whatever was left should be enough; if food was bountiful, they all ate well, if it was scarce, they all economised. His parental home not only instilled in the

²⁰ The information about his childhood quoted here was given to me by the Bishop during an interview in Cairo, on February 10, 1998.

Bishop empathy for the poor and those of other religions, it also brought home that one should never be afraid to share. While many saw it as taking away from what they had, in the Bishop's home it was considered to increase life's priceless qualities.

The Bishop was a smart kid. A photograph taken when he was around eight years-old shows his trademark inquisitive and penetrating look that never took any tall tale for granted. "He can look right through you," Many Copts used to tell me. "He is more than psychic; he has supernatural vision." He denied it. "I just watch, observe, and listen," he used to say. "In the noise we Egyptians make, much information is lost, and only when still can we hear and see what is really going on." His watching, observing, and listening made him refuse to waste time on useless activities, even as a child in school.

In the year he was born, 1923, Egypt had gained a measure of independence from Great Britain. As a first step to strengthening the nation, the new government launched an ambitious educational programme that provided free primary education for all children. In villages, these schools were meant to replace the traditional elementary schools called *kuttabs*, where Muslims were taught reading and writing by memorising the Qur'an, while Christian children learned part of the Gospels and the Psalms by heart. The school had one teacher, who often left the actual instruction to an advanced student. The Bishop's parents sent him to the *kuttab* where he sat among children who were running and screaming. If and when they were quiet, they memorised the Bible. Young as he was, he realised it was doing him no good and begged his parents: "Take me out of that mad house; I can study the book by myself." His parents enrolled him in one of the new schools in town, where he gained enough knowledge to continue high school and be accepted at Cairo University. At the age of seventeen, he moved to Cairo, joining the swelling numbers of Egyptian youth moving from the countryside to the big city.

Bishop Athanasius came from Coptic royalty; his family was packed with priests, monks and bishops. One of his uncles had even been the Pope (Macarius III) from 1944-45 for the brief period of eighteen months. He had been old when elected and his reign was too short to be memorable. But Athanasius remembered sitting on his knee and listening to the many stories he told about living in a monastery. At the age of seventeen, in 1940, he had decided he would become a monk.

Farmer, Father, and Garbage Collector

This rural background was foundational to what the Bishop called his "two main identities:" that of farmer and garbage collector. I would like to add a third one: that of a father. In my analysis, all of his activities; including that of leader, community worker, scholar and educator, can be translated back to these "identities."

The Farmer

Bishop Athanasius always remained a farmer; he had a keen eye for practical details and great respect for manual work. In fact, he respected all he worked with, whatever their position. In his own way he was also an environmental activist. His understanding for the plight of those working the land became the moving force behind the developmental

and agricultural projects within his Diocese.²¹ He himself did not shy away from manual work; many testify of witnessing him at the crack of dawn cleaning bathrooms while at youth camp or in the student dorms. According to him, “Cleaning the bathroom is a better job than giving speeches; it makes people feel comfortable.” (Interview Gamal Zekrie, Cairo, 3-13-2015)

The habit of sharing meals and doing things together stayed with the Bishop his entire life and considerably influenced his management approach. When launching new projects he stressed the importance of teamwork. Considering all to be on the same level, and using for Egypt’s hierarchical society unusual formats of, for example, open discussions and group study sessions, he encouraged all to speak their minds and form their own opinions.²² Furthermore, respect for men and women of all ages and backgrounds allowed him to take advice from the sisters who were running the various projects in his Diocese. He saw criticism as a blessing. (Interview Sister Rauth, Cairo, March 4-2015)

The community of the Sisters of St. Mary started March 19, 1965.²³ The sisters helped the Bishop execute many of this developmental, social, educational and health projects. From the beginning, the Bishop consulted with them about the types of vocation they wished to pursue. When in 1975, the famous Soeur Emmanuel contacted the community to ask for their help, they were only five fully consecrated sisters.²⁴ To pursue her passion in caring for the garbage collectors at the Ezbet en-Nakhlarea in north Cairo, Soeur Emmanuelle needed an Egyptian partner. The sisters and the Bishop discussed the proposal at great length and decided to take on the work. It meant that one of them, Sister Sarah, would move to Cairo and live outside the community more or less permanently. While the hierarchy of clergy, age, and gender, would have allowed the Bishop to have the last word, he left the final decision up to her.²⁵

This basic attitude of encouraging individuals to discern their own talents and vocation also had the unexpected result of creating new forms of hierarchy within the Church since the Bishop selected people for certain offices based on their capacities and not based on age, rank or education. The Bishop’s concern to create strong, committed leaders with an independent mind translated in numerous new priests, deacons and other servants trained in his Diocese who went on to serve the larger Church, in Egypt as well as in the lands of immigration.

Furthermore, Bishop Athanasius understood the importance of education; especially for the very young and for those left behind by circumstances. During the days he served as a Sunday school teacher, supervising the Sunday school of Faggala in Cairo (1947-1958), he preferred to take the pre-school level classes. Nobody else wanted that age group since it was not considered to be prestigious. He, however, saw the immense potential hidden in the minds of those five-year-children. In later years, while Coptic convents decided to accept candidates with university degrees only, he mandated that the Sisters of St. Mary received illiterate women as well. As part of their novitiate they learned to read and write.

²¹ For an overview of the various social and developmental activities initiated by Bishop Athanasius see: Diocese of Beni Souef, *Participation in Ministry*.

²²Salama. *Shakhsyat*, 14.

²³ For more information about the nuns, see: Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*.

²⁴ For the entire story see: Soeur Sara, *Emmanuelle*, 45-49.

²⁵ Soeur Sara, *Emmanuelle*, 48.

The Garbage Collector

“Bishop Athanasius had no sense of boundaries (*hudud*),” many of those who worked with him told me. By this they meant that he did not differentiate among people and took them for who and what they were. He used to say: “I never met anybody I did not love.”²⁶ In his eyes everybody came carrying, “a recommendation from Jesus.” The Bishop’s motto was: “We are all part of Christ’s body; I am the hand, you are the finger, and she is the arm.” The sick and the weak were “the parts that are hurting in the body of Christ.” Working with the mentally and physically handicapped as well as with the elderly confirmed him in this idea and once occasioned him say that what made him a Bishop was, “helping the handicapped and the old people.” To him washing the bodies of the elderly equalled “standing in front of the altar,” and carrying their potties in the morning was the same as “carrying the incense during mass.” (Interview Sister Rauth, Cairo, March 4-2015).

The life of Jesus Christ inspired the Bishop’s idea to self-identify as a “garbage collector.” Jesus had come to collect all human sins and became poor in order to be able to serve all. This attitude marked all Athanasius’ actions as a religious and spiritual leader. He refused to wear fancy robes and when a wealthy Copt in Beni Suef chided him for opening the doors of the bishopric every night, he answered, “I am not the director of a big company, I am a father and must take care of my children at all times.” (Interview Bishop Musa, March 13-2015)

The Father

One aspect of the Bishop’s life that is little known is that 1947-1958 he served as a father to his sister’s children. When his brother-in-law died unexpectedly, Athanasius postponed his dream to enter the monastery in order to provide for the widow and the young children. In my view, this blow of fate would help him gain a deep understanding of the hardships and pitfalls of raising a family in an economy devastated by the Second World War.

Never would he underestimate the plight of parents living from paycheck to paycheck. Raising a niece, Lily, who later on became a medical doctor, also gave him keen insights in the various forms of discrimination against women. In high school, Lily wanted to study the science track, but the headmistress refused to allow her into that programme since, “that was not appropriate for girls.” (Interview Dr. Lily, Cairo, March 12, 2015) When questioning the decision, Lily was disciplined for being “rude” and “impolite.” Still being an unassuming young man, Athanasius’ powers of persuasion must have been considerable since the school gave in and allowed Lily to take the science classes. Without this preparation she would not have been able to study medicine and become a successful medical specialist.

Bishop Athanasius himself traced all his identities back to his vocation as an educator. Having taught at Sunday schools as well as high schools, he understood that teaching was not just by the word but also by example. What set him apart from many of his colleagues was that he practised what he taught.

²⁶ Salama. *Shakhsiyat* mentions the same point: “I do not remember having detested anyone in my entire life. Neither did I love one person more than the other,” 31.

Practising Intellectual Humility

Thus far I have introduced an exceptional man who was highly intelligent, had a keen eye for detail, and used a practical and hands on approach to all types of work. His personality stood out for its tolerance of those who were different, his compassion for the poor and those suffering, and his simplicity. Most of all, the people who remember him mention his humility that was experienced as deeply authentic. So far, to prove my point, I have given various examples, several of them gathered during a research trip in March 2015, in combination with my own interactions with Bishop Athanasius.

Researchers of leadership would have a field day with such a personality since in many ways his attitude seems to defy the norms of what makes a strong, authoritative leader for whom humility would be an undesirable trait. Yet, the Bishop was not a pushover; his voice was taken seriously, not only by his parishioners but also, for example, by the Governor of Beni Suef who often sought his advice. The virtue of intellectual humility seems to be key to his success as a leader.

One of the burning questions in the research on work-related issues has been how leaders positively influence the people working for them. An important finding is that leaders who have a unique combination of drive and humility create an atmosphere within their company that encourages people to freely exchange ideas, create strong bonds, work together and are willing to sacrifice for each other.²⁷ Within the constraints of Egyptian and Coptic expectations concerning hierarchy, status and gender, the Bishop introduced working methods that allowed all, from the lowest to the highest rank to have a voice. Even the participants in his programmes for the mentally retarded were asked to pitch in.

While it is an important virtue, researchers of behavioural studies found that when facing certain situations, even intellectual humility can be difficult to practice or maintain. The most prevalent of such situations have been identified as when communities or individuals negotiate ideas that are linked to forms of identity, experience negative moral emotions such as disgust, when there is an imbalance of power in relationships in which a leader holds influence over ideas and their exchange, or in case of disagreements when both parties are emotionally invested in the outcome. The Papal Committee certainly served as one such situation, yet the Bishop managed to avoid frontal collisions with those who were against it. He never spoke ill of those criticising him and insisted on respecting the clerical hierarchy that put Shenouda above him.

After Shenouda's return of Cairo, Athanasius faced the challenge of setting the right tone for future engagement. They met in public for the first time on Easter Monday, April 1985 during a visit to the Monastery of the Syrians. The story of this meeting as told by an eyewitness goes as follows:

Easter Monday, April 1985, a Coptic couple now living in Illinois but originally from Beni Suef visited the Monastery of the Syrians accompanied by Bishop Athanasius. The occasion was the feast on the day after Easter, Sham en-Nessim. They came to greet Pope Shenouda who customary celebrated this day at the monastery where he used to be a monk. As they came in, they found Pope Shenouda sitting in the courtyard of the monastery, surrounded by a crowd of visitors. They had a picnic together, eating traditional dishes such as *fessikh*, salted

²⁷McElroy, etc. McElroy, etc. "Intellectual Humility,"21.

fish, and green onions to celebrate the day. The celebration that year was momentous since President Mubarak had lifted the decree on the Pope's detainment in January. For Bishop Athanasius it was the first time he met the Pope in public.

According to the couple, Athanasius called HH Pope Shenouda from the top of his lungs saying, '*Anba Shenouda, sayyidna, akhteet hallelni.*' [Our Master Pope Shenouda, I sinned, forgive me.] He walked quickly towards the Pope and prostrated himself in front of him until his forehead touched the ground. Pope Shenouda pulled him up and they embraced each other and both burst out in tears while the mass of visitors looked on, dumbfounded and in utter astonishment."²⁸

This public act of contrition was a brilliant move to deflate any possible anger or animosity from the side of the Pope. Other Committee members were not so lucky. Samuel could not rehabilitate himself and, according to researcher S.S. Hasan, was the person Shenouda "hated more than anyone else in the world."²⁹ His legacy was erased from Coptic memory. Relations between the Pope and Athanasius became cordial enough for the Bishop to remain one of the most respected members of the Holy Synod and be assigned prestigious duties such as representing the Coptic Church at the World Council of Churches.

When asked about the time in the Committee, Athanasius never spoke ill of Shenouda. Instead, he acknowledged that he knew his position as Committee Chair would incite hatred and blame but insisted that his personal experience should not matter:

Suppose that history would say that there had been a crisis in the Church and a man called Athanasius had acted as a traitor. Even then the main fact would remain that the Church survived the crisis. Never mind the person. (Interview Cairo, February 19, 1998).

After Shenouda passed away in March 2012, his successor Tawadros II initiated a process of rehabilitation for those who had been pushed away from the Coptic stage during the time of his predecessor. October 6, 2016, during a speech commemorating his death, Samuel's voice could finally be heard and Copts learned that he and Athanasius had been of the same mind about their role in the Committee and relationship with the Egyptian government. The evening before the parade, Coptic leaders had asked Samuel if attending was the right thing to do. To him it was, since, "the welfare of the Church has priority over all else."³⁰ The speaker, Pachomius, currently one of the oldest and highly esteemed Coptic Bishops, referred to the murder as Samuel's "martyrdom," elevating him to the level of martyr; the highest possible rank in Coptic spiritual hierarchy.

²⁸ Waziz@coptsdigest.com, message from William Hanna, St. Louis Missouri, sent Tu. Dec. 5, 2000.

²⁹ Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, p. 97, 184.

³⁰ Al Anba Pachomius, October 6, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atr-OImgwUU&feature=youtu.be>

Conclusion

The Papal Committee unleashed situations where even the most peaceful person could have reacted negatively; situations that could have led to conflicts due to identity (gender, hierarchy, for example), or disgust (when dealing with people who act in ways that would make others angry or aggravated). Yet the many oral testimonies of people working closely with Bishop Athanasius testify of an insistence on following a path of humility under all circumstances, even at the detriment of his own status and reputation. In my view this attitude was not just rooted in personality or position, but also in his childhood experiences. However, he never considered his actions and attitude to be extraordinary or different from what could and should be the norm. Many called him “saintly.” From psychological research geared towards the corporate world we now learn that we can classify his behaviour as “intellectually humble.” In fact, it is the type of behaviour that allows for the good life; for a balanced society where the wellbeing of the individual supersedes the personal condition and translates into wellbeing for all.

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