Coptic Pope Visits Woodbury

Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria addresses the crowd of 700 who attended the cornerstone-laying at Woodbury. L. to r., Bishop Jonathan Sherman of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, Bishop Bakhamous of Behira and Pentapolis (Libya), Patriarch Shenouda, Nassau County Executive Ralph Caso. Partly visible behind Bishop Sherman is Bishop John McGann of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Center. - Ed Hanaski photo

Pope Shenouda III, the 117th successor to St. Mark as Pope of Alexandria, laid the cornerstone for the St. Mark Coptic Church Center soon to be erected in Woodbury, as high clergymen of various denominations and hundreds of Egyptian-born Coptic Christians gathered beneath huge tents Sat. afternoon Apr. 18 to witness the historic event.

The patriarch’s presence in the United States marks the first time a reigning pontiff of the Coptic Orthodox Church has visited the Americas. He was accompanied by seven Oriental bishops.

Enthroned as leader of his church Nov. 14, 1971, the 48-year-old patriarch will visit other Coptic Church sites in the U.S. and Canada on his 40-day tour of this continent. During the past 15 years some 50,000 Egyptian Copts have emigrated to this country and have established 14 Coptic Church centers. There are three in California, two in Colorado, one in Ohio and others scattered throughout coastal areas of the U.S. The Woodbury Church at present is led by Father Gabriel A. Abdel-sayed, rector of St. Mark’s Coptic Church, parish of New York and New Jersey.

Copts believe their church is the most ancient in the world since, according to their beliefs, it was founded by St. Mark the Evangelist, the writer of the Second Gospel, in 42 A.D. The New Testament of the Bible, tells of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt and sources of the Egyptian Church maintain that Jesus, Mary and Joseph remained in Egypt over three-and-a-half years until King Herod died. There are numerous shrines in Egypt which commemorate the Holy Family’s stay in Egypt. The Monastery of the Holy Virgin, known as Al Muharraq, is located in the Osroyen Mountains and was the largest monastery in the Orient.

The Copts are the native Christians of Egypt and direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians. The Coptic language is a development of the ancient Egyptian spoken since the early days of the Pharaohs, originally written in picture form called hieroglyphics. Some believe this was the language Jesus spoke.

St. Mark was of Jewish origin and said to be a nephew of Barnabas and a relative of St. Peter, the first pope of the Roman Catholic Church. It is believed that many important events in Christianity, such as the Washing of the Feet and the first Communion, took place in St. Mark’s house.

The Coptic Church is the largest Christian Church in the Middle East. The Copts number 5 million in Egypt alone. Coptic students and families reside in Europe, America and Australia as well as other Middle Eastern and African countries. The Coptic Orthodox Church is a member of the World Council of Churches.

There is growing interest in Coptic studies in universities and research centers throughout the world because of the wealth of these studies on the early history of Christianity. Part of the plan for the Woodbury center is the establishment of a library housing Coptic literature.

The land on which St. Mark Coptic Church in Woodbury will stand was given by Dr. Nabil Eldeiry, a Fort Jefferson physician who immigrated to the United States about 10 years ago. The master plan for the center includes a church, library and a multi-purpose room in which activities for children, youth and senior citizens will be conducted. The first building to be erected, after sufficient donations are received, will house the multi-purpose room.