

The Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies

(Vincent Mistrìh)

a) *Foundation*

On September 16, 1954, the Center for Christian Oriental Studies was inaugurated in Muski. Present at the ceremony were the first President of the Egyptian Republic Mohammed Naguib, the Apostolic Delegate, the Custos of the Holy Land Fr. Giacinto Faccio and various civil and religious dignitaries. The Custody of the Holyland had for some time desired to found an Oriental institute. With the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the great friary of Muski – seat of the Venetian Embassy of old and later the great Latin parish of Cairo – was adapted for this purpose.

In the beginning, the purpose of the Center was not clearly defined. There was even talks of a Catholic University to publish subjects on Islamology and Arab literature. But very quickly two objectives were determined: a) to promote the studies regarding the Christian communities of the Middle East; b) to continue the research on the history of the Holy Land, in the footsteps of Fr. Girolamo Golubovich

b) *The Library*

The Library is divided into two great sections: general material (theology, history, geography, art) and the specialised discipline formed by the cultural patrimony of each Oriental Christian community (Copt, Armenian, Syrian). To these specialised sections is added Arab Christianity, that is, the Christian religio-cultural material written in the Arab language.

The initial core of the library consisted of the most appropriate books to the mission of the Center, gathered from the various friaries of the Custody. In time, other books were added to this collection, either as gifts or purchases or subscriptions to periodicals and collections. Local purchases of books are made occasionally or at the Cairo Book Fair at the end of January each year.

This library fills a lacuna in Cairo: a Christian library. With the foundation of the Center, the library gained validity. To date, there are about 100,000 volumes in addition to a good collection of periodicals and Arab-Christian manuscripts. Four paintings of immense value are found here, depicting scenes of Venice in the 1700s.

c) *Publications*

The main activity of the Center is research. The studies of those assigned to the Center and their collaborators are published in the annual periodical *Studia Orientalia Christiana - Collectanea* (= *SOC Collectanea*), which is in its 38th volume, or in the *SOC Monographiae* series.

The publications of Fr. Gabriele Giamberardini (+1978) in the 1960s and 1970s constitutes the core of first class research. With the war of 1967, the Lebanese war, and the shortage of personel, the publications were greatly hindered; it only resumed in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, thanks to the arrival of a new collaborator (Fr. Libero Cruciani) and the computerisation of editorial work.

d) *External Collaboration*

From the beginning, the Center had had external collaborators. Given the scarcity of personnel, these collaborators provide a precious support to the Center. We remember Kush Burmester, Otto Meinardus, Prof. Khater and Prof. Bartolomeo Pirone of the Oriental Institute of Naples, Prof. Armando Serra of the University "Sapienza" of Rome, Mr. Alberto Elli.

e) *Contacts, Ecumenism*

Those assigned to the Center, besides doing research and publication, are also involved in another important activity: assisting academic readers. Many doctoral theses were produced from our Center. A great number of students from seminaries and religious institutes in Cairo find not only books, but also help from our library. Even professors and students of Egyptian universities (majority muslims) find help and collaboration.

It is noted with satisfaction that the Arab world is open to Christian studies. Particular attention is given to the Byzantine and Crusader periods.

In 1982, a thesis on St. Ephraem was defended at the University of Azhar with our collaboration. At the University of Cairo, other theses were defended such as *The Byzantine Empire under Heraclius* (1985) where the Enotikon, monotheletism are mentioned; *The Schism of the East and its influence on the relation between the East and the West*; *The theory of knowledge in the writings of St. Bonaventure*; *The Contra Celsum* of Origen. Presently the Arabic translation of *The Annals of Caffaro* is being undertaken with the collaboration of a professor from the University of Tanta.

Prospects for the Future

The authorities of the Custody have always affirmed to have at heart the Center in Muski and appreciate very much the moral, cultural, and material patrimony, despite feeling somewhat forgotten these past years.

As a prospect for the future, I must say I cannot be as substantial as I am conjectural, since for many years we have made attempts and given suggestions. The following may be points for reflection:

a) Personnel

With the shortage of vocations—much more in the academic life—the problem of personnel continues to constitute the principle difficulty. It is true that numbers are not everything, but now we are truly down and out, and this calls for extremely urgent measures.

b) Openness

Today the Custody, in remedying for the lack of personnel, is launching new experiences of meeting and collaborating with other institutes. It is necessary to look with optimism at this tendency, not so much as a closure, but also as a beneficial opportunity applicable even to our case. It suffices to mention the new Publishing Center of Milan.

c) Laity

Since Vatican II, the Catholic laity is called to a more tangible mission in the heart of the Church. We acknowledge with optimism the work done by the staff and the collaboration given by the external collaborators—all of whom are lay—are fulfillments of this mission. Hence, it is legitimate to encourage this movement.

d) Priority

For some time now the Order has adopted a strategy of priority. The Center enjoys this prerogative and hence also this strategy. Hence, openness to other institutes, and collaborating with laity, do not dispense from the sometimes painful cuts required in continuing the work.

e) *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*

The SBF, in the fifty years of prosperity and adversity, has always been the institute closest to the Center in Muski. This session is testimony to this. It is necessary to study how to better increase and further concretise this collaboration, more so since it is one of the most disposed means to help the Center today.

f) *Books and periodicals*

With the restructuring of the Order's provinces in Western Europe, the restocking of books and periodicals had undergone a turbulent hitch. Many works and collections have today been interrupted with grave consequences to the library. We think that with the means and organisational centers the Custody has available today, this gap can be filled relatively easily. The sections in our library on Medieval Europe, the Crusades, and the Byzantine world should be increased. They are consulted the most. It is well noted that the *Patrologia Graeca* is among the most requested works.

Conclusion

One can say that the Center in Muski, with all its precious cultural and social services, rendered to the Christian and Muslim world of the Middle East, has realised the hopes expressed by President Naguib and the Custos on the day of its inauguration. The network of relationships between the Institutes and learned people from East and West today is more than ever active and valid; and constitutes the best means for ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. We hope that the Custody, as an intelligent and wise paterfamilias, will search among its “new and old treasures” and thereby find a good solution for the challenges the Center faces today.

(English translation by Lionel Goh)