

Saint Archdeacon Habib Girgis

“Lord you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago.”

1. Who is Habib Girgis?

- Is a pioneer of religious education in our land of modern history. He was not only a teacher, but a school to many servants and youths. He was a symbol for positive work in the church, a symbol for the love of education, a symbol for meekness, zeal, and many other virtues.
- **Girgis in the Church:**
 - Girgis Served with Their Holiness Pope Yousab II, Markarius III, Yoannis XIX, Kyrillos V
- **Overview of Habib’s Girgis’ Life:**
 - He was born in Cairo in 1876
 - While he was still a Child, his father died in 1882 and his mother gave him a religious upbringing
 - He was the first student to be picked to enroll in the seminary when it was first established in 1893. During his final year he was appointed as a religion teacher
 - He was the highest-ranking graduate of the seminary’s first graduating class of 1898
- **Death and Sainthood:**
 - Habib Girgis died on August 21, 1951.
 - On 20 June 2013, he was canonized as a saint by the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church.
- In 1897, while Habib was still a student at the seminary, he delivered an impressive two-part lecture on the subject of **“Christian Religion”** over two successive Sundays at the Great Coptic School.
- At age 22, in 1898, he was the one who established the seminary of our era. It was he who bought its land in Mahmasha and built its building. In addition to the many courses in religion he introduced courses in logic, philosophy, psychology, Hebrew, and Greek. He also increased the emphasis on the studies of Arabic, English, Coptic, history, and church hymns.
- Habib Girgis established the School for Cantors attached to the Seminary. He also built a church for the seminary, which is now Saint Mary in Mahmasha. On September 14, 1898, he was appointed dean of the seminary by the letter from H.H. Pope Kyrillos V. He continued in this role for 53 years until his departure.

2. A Servant with a Vision

- Habib was a servant with a vision in a way that he was a visionary and pioneer in God's field. At age 24, Habib Girgis started the Sunday School Movement for religious education of the young in their own communities.
- In 1900, Girgis established Sunday School and designed its curriculum. Under his leadership, the seminary Sunday school became an educational entity.
- In 1941, Habib Girgis held the first Sunday Teacher Conference where 400 teachers attended. It took 40 years to get 400 teachers to serve in Sunday Schools. Although the Sunday School movement was faced with many obstacles since it was a new movement to the church, Habib Girgis did not lose hope but rather remained motivated.
- Habib Girgis aimed to write the religion curriculum and books for schools:
 - In 1909, he wrote his book, Summary of Faith Fundamentals in three volumes for elementary schools.
 - In 1937, he wrote eight new books in a series, Orthodox Christian Principles, to suit elementary and secondary schools.
 - Later, he wrote another three books in another series, Precious Treasure of Holy History.
- Habib Girgis was very familiar with numerous strategies for religious education, including debates, catechism, self-directed learning, pantomime, storytelling, excursions, handicrafts, and self-directed research or projects. In addition, poetry and hymns were important to Habib Girgis; he believed that he could teach the central beliefs of the Coptic Faith to children through hymns that he wrote himself.
 - For example, the hymnology of the "Midnight Praise" defends the Orthodox teaching that Saint Mary is the Mother of God – a belief that Nestorius denied in the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in AD 431, and for which he was excommunicated.

3. The Sunday School Movement

- The establishment and success of the Sunday School movement, which flourishes even today in the Coptic Orthodox Church, are attributable largely to the work of Habib Girgis
 - Girgis had realized that children were the key to the revival of the church. Youth were the most vulnerable to conversion to other religions.
 - Habib Girgis' community was mired in illiteracy, ignorance, and apathy and therefore he decided to use education as his weapon to tackle this problem.
- Sunday School was initiated by Habib Girgis informally by gathering local children on Sundays at various churches and societies in Cairo
 - The first church he began with was the church of Virgin Mary in the middle-class suburb of Al-Faggalah.
 - He taught these young people all about the bible, the Coptic rites, church history, and the lives of Egyptian saints and martyrs.
- In the mid-nineteenth century, Western missions in Egypt had been running Sabbath Schools to attract and teach youthful converts from other faiths
 - The first was the American Presbyterian Mission followed by other Protestants and Roman Catholics
- In 1898 the Holy Synod issued its decree on the necessity of Christian education for school children.
 - In 1899, Pope Kyrillos V acknowledged the Church's responsibility to provide Christian education to young youth.
 - In 1903, the third decree was issued from the Holy Synod regarding four major concerns:

1 st Concern	The necessity to implement Christian education among Coptic children from a young age, and to spread rigorous religious values among the Copts so that they would live upright lives to benefit themselves, their families, and the nation as a whole
2 nd Concern	This concern is about the advocacy of religious education in Coptic schools and the rearing of Coptic Orthodox children attendance at Sunday liturgies and other general worship services
3 rd Concern	Attention was given to the compulsory teaching of the Coptic history and faith in all Coptic Schools and in the <i>Kuttab</i> system
4 th Concern	These lessons were based on Coptic Orthodox principles, and schoolbooks to be approved by a religious education committee based at the Patriarchate

- Sunday School movement grew rapidly, becoming especially powerful in the period between 1935 and 1942
 - By the 1940s, several of the Sunday schools in Cairo were of great reputation, each excelling in a particular area.
 - For example, Jazirat Badran was known for its intellectuality, and the branch of Saint Anthony in Shubra for its spirituality, while the branch at Giza was recognized a being more socially aware.

4. Challenges to Sunday School Girgis Faced

- In March 1948, Pope Yousab II expressed his disappointment to Girgis over an apparent lack of organization and suggested he addresses the following issues:
 - Sunday school needs more care, supervision, and administration
 - Examine the required tools needed for the growth of these schools, as they are the only guarantee to build a strong generation of faithful youth
- In the end of the letter, His Holiness Pope Yousab requested Habib Girgis to provide his opinions and final decision concerning the matters raised by the Pope.
- At the same time too, Pope Yousab wrote to the priests in Cairo whose churches did not have Sunday Schools to begin directing them to open one.

Habib Girgis' Response

- In response to the pope's criticism, Habib implemented a new committee with a defined structure and administrative system. This new committee was divided into two boards:
 - A General Committee:
Members of the general committee were required to reside in Cairo, to have experience in Sunday School and youth affairs, to at least be twenty-one years of age, and to be of the Coptic Orthodox Confession
 - An Executive Board:
Was comprised of 15 members chosen from the general committee.
- The work of the Higher Central Committee was divided into three main areas:

Administrative	Secretarial work and the system of ministry according to the fundamental law
Educational	Pedagogy, the preparation of educational programs and publications, and the spiritual nourishment of Sunday School teachers
Financial	Responsible for managing finances

- In addition to these committees, the system included diocesan administrative branches under the supervision of the local metropolitan or bishop. Each branch had:
 - a diocesan priest
 - two anchors (lay members of the Church considered leaders of the community because of years of service)
 - four local Sunday School and Coptic Youth League coordinators
- The second element Habib responded to His Holiness Pope Yousab with was a bundle of detailed forms and reports prepared for use in the administration of Sunday School.

These forms and reports were to be completed consecutively by:

- every Sunday School Servant and coordinator,
- then checked and signed by the parish priest.

On these forms, Girgis placed a scriptural verse in the header as a reminder to educators:

❖ Revelation 2:10

“¹⁰Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**”

Habib also asked servants to keep track of their kids’ attendance and send to their coordinators weekly reports regarding how youth were responding to the lesson.

We thank God for the saintly life and thriving ministry of the prominent theologian and visionary St. Habib Girgis. The Coptic society now reaps the fruits of his various journeys for reformation and revival.