

## **WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

From the earliest years in the history of Christianity, there have existed communities of virgins, who dedicated their lives to the service of the Lord, free from all family ties. However, in Egypt, some young women preferred to remain with their families while performing such sacred duties toward others. One of the most prominent examples is the fourth-century virgin who offered her abode to shelter Saint ATHANASIUS the Apostolic during one of his exiles. She herself carried his missives to his church following in Alexandria.

Other examples of women who selected the monastic way of life, in what may be described as nunneries, existed even earlier during the ages of Christian persecutions. One of the most cherished examples among the Copts is the story of the rise and fall of Sitt (Lady) Dimyanah (see DIMYANAH AND HER FORTY VIRGINS). She was the daughter of Marcus, Roman governor of the province of Burullus in the Delta, a Christian who recanted under [pressure](#) during the reign of Emperor DIOCLETIAN (284-305) but later declared his adherence to the faith and was martyred.

His daughter Dimyanah had refused all proposals of marriage and decided to lead a life of Christian asceticism in the wasteland near the city of Damietta. Forty devout virgins followed her. Her father built for her what later became a nunnery. Eventually, like her father, she, along with all her companions, suffered martyrdom under Diocletian. Diocletian had in vain offered her safety if only she would offer incense and a libation to his image. The site of her retirement and martyrdom is still a favorite center of pilgrimage among the Copts. Her memory is celebrated by them on 12-20 May; curiously, the Copts are joined by Muslims in these national festivities.

Another prominent example is that of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a highly lettered young woman whose martyrdom occurred in 307 during

the persecution of Maximinus. The monastery bearing her name on [Mount Sinai](#) is said to have been erected by Justinian (327-365) on the spot to which her body had presumably been carried by the angels of the Lord (see MOUNT SINAI MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE). This monastery has survived as a center of enlightenment and sanctity.

When Saint ANTONY THE GREAT, founder of monastic rule, decided to retire to the Eastern Desert in the late third century, he entrusted his young sister to a community of pious virgins in Middle Egypt. Saint PACHOMIUS (c. 290-348), father of Coptic cenobitism, is said to have established a convent for his sister Miryam, who was joined by four hundred sisters. That convent was situated about twelve miles from his own monastery at TABENNESE, near the city of Qina.

Pachomius also founded another convent at al-Fakhurah, one mile from a monastery near Idfu. He appointed a monk of mature age and sanctity for the guidance of each of those foundations. As a rule, the sites for convents were selected in the [neighborhood](#) of cities and villages within the [Nile](#) Valley, and not in the remote desert wilderness where monastic establishments were favored.

The biography of Anba Magrophios ([Dayr al-Suryan](#) manuscript 268) enumerates a series of nunneries in the sixth century. Other convents appeared later in Lower Egypt, though a precise survey of them is hard to make because of a lack of sources.

Records from the later Middle Ages reveal the existence of nunneries. In the fifteenth century the Muslim historian of the Copts al-MAQRIZI mentioned four convents at HARIT AL-RUM and HARIT ZUWAYLAH in Cairo as well as Saint Barbara and the Church of the Virgin known as al-MU'ALLAQAH in Old Cairo.

In the nineteenth century, the Coptic historian 'Abd-al-Masih al-Mas'udi mentions five of these institutions: two at Harit Zuwaylah, and one at

Harit al-Rum, together with DAYR MAR JIRJIS and DAYR ABU SAYFAYN (Saint Mercurius) in Old Cairo. Those attached to Saint Barbara's church and al-Mu'allaqah have disappeared. The following six convents have survived to our day:

1. Dayr Sitt Dimyanah in Bilqas, Gharbiyyah Province
2. Dayr Mar Jirjis in Old Cairo
3. Dayr al-Amir Tadrus al-Shutbi (Convent of Saint Theodore) in Harit al-Rum, near the Church of Our Lady
4. The Convent of the Holy Virgin Mary at Harit Zuwaylah
5. DAYR AL-BANAT (Convent of Virgins) in the vicinity of the Church of Saint Mercurius in [DAYR ABU SAYFAYN](#)
6. a convent founded in the name of Saint George at Harit Zuwaylah in the old Coptic quarter of the city of Cairo.

Bishop Andarawus of Damietta (d. 1978) started a female religious group at the sanctuary of Sitt Dimyanah. Independent groups of nuns, dedicated but without affiliation and often living at home, lead contemplative lives and participate in services. Others volunteer for mundane activities such as baking bread, cleaning house, or serving in orphanages and benevolent institutions.

Since 1965, in the city of BANI SUEF, there has arisen the Daughters of Saint Mary, a growing community whose members are consecrated in two stages. The first stage, that of novice, is not binding for life, and during it, a member can leave at will. The second stage is that of nunhood, and its occupant, once consecrated, is committed to service for her whole life.

These nuns render service in senior citizen homes in both Bani Suef and Cairo. They also offer help in clinics and nurseries. The order has established ecumenical relations with similar Roman Catholic and Protestant institutions in other parts of the world.

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## **ATHANASIUS, BISHOP OF BANI SUEF AND AL-BAHNASA**

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