

22. EGYPT



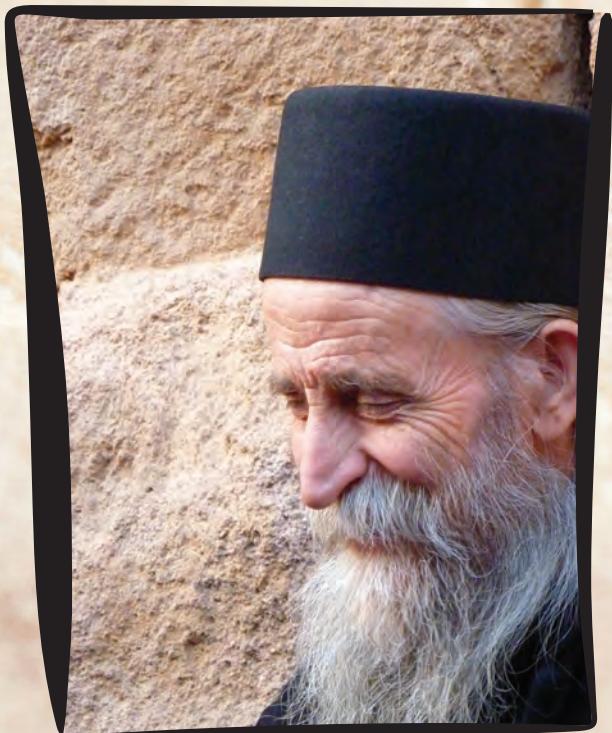
In Egypt, the Arabic word for bread — “aish” — is also the word for life. Egypt is considered the “cradle of sourdough bread”, where way back during Pharaonic times people invented the technology of fermenting dough and had risen bread, different from the wide-spread flat bread of the Middle East. I travelled across Egypt in the spring of 2010 to explore the ancient traditions of breadmaking in the oldest monasteries in the world.

The first monastery I visited was the Monastery of St. Catherine, built in the 5th century on Mount Sinai, where according to the Old Testament the Prophet Moses received from God the Ten Commandments. I spent there two weeks, soaking the peace and beauty of the millennial stone buildings and icons of the monastery nestled amidst mystical desert rocks.



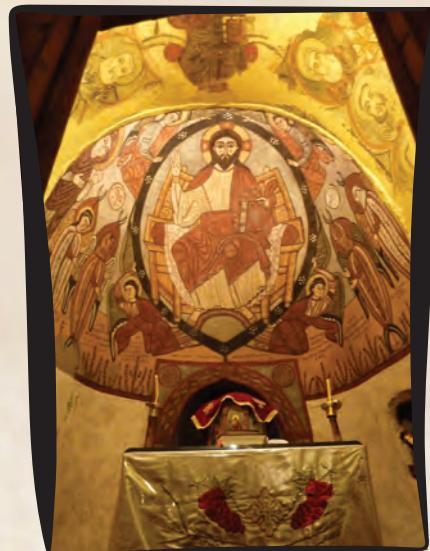
I was impressed by the friendly relations between the monks (most of them Greek Orthodox Christians, but also some coming from as far as the USA) and the surrounding Bedouin tribes, who brought flat bread and other foods to the Monastery.

The highlight of experiencing this ancient holy place was the midnight pilgrimage to the top of Mount Sinai in order to meet the sunrise up where Prophet Moses met God. It was a breathtaking experience to climb the steep mountain slopes in a procession of twinkling lights with dozens of people from all over the world holding candles, as if a star-lit staircase was ascending to Heaven!



The extraordinary harmony and unity of so many different cultures on top of Mount Sinai, however, starkly contrasted with the deep conflict and civil war between Muslims and Christians that was already burning across Egypt and escalated to the so-called “Bread Riots” in 2011. In the Bread Riots thousands of hungry, desperate lower-class people went in the streets shouting with bread loaves as if weapons in their hands protesting against the rising prices of basic foodstuffs, mainly wheat and bread, which left many Egyptian families with no food. The root of the problem is that Egyptians are the world’s largest consumers of bread, but Egypt imports its wheat – it is the world’s largest wheat importer - from the USA, Canada and Australia, and they dictate the prices thus affecting the poorest Egyptians.

When I went to Cairo from Mount Sinai, I was moved to see so much poverty in the footsteps of the great Pyramids surrounded by crowds of tourists, yet at the same time I was deeply touched by the hospitality and gratitude of these simple people in their deprived but honest way of life.



From Cairo, I headed towards Alexandria through the Wadi El Natrun desert in order to visit the Monastery of St. Macarius. The St. Macarius Monastery is a male Coptic (Egyptian Christian) monastery, and women cannot stay there, but the monks were so kind and responsive to my interest in their traditions that they allowed me to put up my tent in front of the Monastery gate and spend a week with them learning their traditions. I spent unforgettable moments soaking the unique beauty of Coptic chanting

(church singing) and the mystic presence of Coptic icons with their expressive eyes and vivid colors, while learning about the Coptic traditions of church bread. Similar to the Orthodox Christians, Copts place a bread stamp on their church bread, but it has different symbols on it: a big cross in middle, symbolizing Christ, is surrounded by 12 smaller crosses standing for the 12 Holy Apostles, and an outside inscription “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” (the “Trisagion” hymn) in Coptic letters.



I learned that in the early Christian period in Egypt, around 5th-6th century AD, there was a tradition to use bread stamps also for daily breads baked in communal ovens, and these stamps had family initials or various symbols, such as fish images (fish was a wide-spread Early Christian symbol).

After leaving the St. Macarius Monastery, I discovered at the nearby Monastery of St. Paisius a very interesting ancient stone through (huge bowl) for making dough and also a wood-fired bread oven with the size of a whole room – indeed, at some point they needed to feed hundreds of monks!



My trip concluded at the Monastery of St. Menas near Alexandria, where I managed to reach late at night, since transport is limited for it lies deep in the heart of isolated sand dunes. I was worried it will be closed, but to my amazement the monastery was open, all bathed in lights and full of people at 10 pm! It was then that I realized the crucial impact of climate on culture – in these hot places, 10 pm was really about the time when the temperatures were bearable to walk outside, including to go pray at a monastery!

Egypt's many faces – of deserts and sea, Christian monasteries and Muslim mosques, poverty and abundance, fellowship and conflict – **taught me that what ultimately matters in life (*aish* in Arabic) is to keep our focus on the simple things that unite us, such as a simple peace of broken bread (*aish*)!**

