

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ THE EARLY YEARS ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

Born in Alexandria in 376, St. Kyrillos studied classics, rhetorics and humanities. His uncle, Pope Theophilus I, the 23rd Patriarch of Alexandria, had a remarkable influence on his theological and spiritual development. On the recommendation of Pope Theophilus, Kyrillos headed to the desert of Wadie El Natroun (the center of monastic life) where he was trained under St. Serapion Themius.

On returning to Alexandria, he was ordained deacon and subsequently a priest by Pope Theophilus and began to diligently study the writings of St. Athanasius the Great, Clement of Alexandria and St. Basil of Caesarea.

✦ ✦ ✦ THE PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA ✦ ✦ ✦

When Pope Theophilus died on 15th October, 412 AD, the government wanted a certain Archdeacon Timothy to succeed but 2 days later, Kyrillos was elected and enthroned as the 24th Patriarch of Alexandria. According to Coptic tradition, he headed to his monastery of St. Makarios to celebrate his first liturgy. The Pontificate of Pope Kyrillos is characterized by his strong and successful campaign against the Nestorian heresy. This earned him the title of Pillar of Faith in the Coptic Church, while the Eastern Orthodox call him the Seal of all the Fathers.

✦ ✦ THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY ✦ ✦

Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople taught the separation of the human and divine natures in Christ; in him the Son of God is distinguished from the son of David. Nestorius started to declare in his teaching in Constantinople that it is wrong to call Virgin Mary 'Theotokos' (God-bearer), a term which has been in use by prominent Fathers since the third century as well as in popular piety. For Nestorius, Mary could be nothing more than the mother of the man Jesus, and the term 'Theotokos' was pagan and blasphemous.

St. Kyrillos wrote a series of letters to Nestorius. In the first, written in June 429, he only asked Nestorius to acknowledge the word 'Theotokos'. In his second letter, in February 430, St. Kyrillos built his arguments in challenging the Antiochene Christology on the words of the Nicene Creed that declares 'God was incarnate and He became man'. In the same year, St. Kyrillos also wrote three letters to the royal family concerning Nestorius: one to the Emperor, the second to his younger sisters Arcadia and Marina, and the third to his elder sister Pulcheria and his wife Eudokia. In the spring of 430, St. Kyrillos wrote five books, which in later years circulated under the title 'Against the Blasphemies of Nestorius'.

St. Kyrillos used the term 'the one incarnate nature of God the Logos' to conserve the Church faith in the person of Jesus Christ. He teaches the 'hypostatic' union of the Logos and the flesh which He united to Himself. He states, "We do not say either that the Word of God dwelt in him who was born of the Holy Virgin as in an ordinary man, lest Christ should be deemed a divinely inspired man, for though the 'Word dwelt among us' (John 1:14), and as it is said, 'All the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Christ' (Colossians 2:9), yet we recognize that 'being made flesh' is not to be defined by us as an 'indwelling' of the Word in him in the same manner as when he is said to dwell in the saints, but that having been united by a union of natures and not converted into flesh, He brought to pass such an indwelling as the soul of man may be said to have in relation to its own body."

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

In June 431 AD, the 3rd Ecumenical Council was held at Ephesus at the request of Emperor Theodosius I, over which St. Kyrillos presided to address the Christological controversies. Nestorius was deposed from his See of Constantinople and excommunicated, his doctrines condemned, the Creed of Nicea was reaffirmed and formal approval was given to the title 'Theotokos'.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ MARIOLOGY ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

St. Kyrillos asserts the 'Theotokos' (Mother of God) for St. Mary as a sign of the Orthodox faith that Jesus Christ who was born and crucified is truly the Incarnate Son of God. This term had been employed by the School of Alexandria for a long time. The English translation 'Mother of God' brings into prominence that thought of the glory of her motherhood, the Greek term fixes attention rather on the Godhead of Him who was born. To deny that she was 'Theotokos' was really to deny that He who was born of her was Incarnate God. St. Kyrillos starts his 12 'Anathemas' thus: "Whoever does not acknowledge Emmanuel to be truly God and hence the holy Virgin 'Theotokos', for she gave fleshly birth to the Word of God made flesh, shall be anathema."

St. Kyrillos was to write the introduction to the Nicene Creed, namely 'We honour you Mother of True Light'. Recited in the Coptic Church prayers of vespers, matins, liturgy and agepeya. Moreover, St. Kyrillos began to write theological hymns in honour of St. Mary. The majority constitute the holy Theotokia recited in the daily praises and doxologies of the Church to this day.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ THE HOLY LITURGY ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

One of the greatest tributes to St. Kyrillos given by the Coptic Orthodox Church is the liturgy that carries the same name. It is considered the oldest liturgy that has kept the Alexandrian liturgical tradition. Its origin is traced to St. Mark the Apostle and Evangelist. It is introduced in the Euchologian (liturgy book) of the Coptic Church by the words 'The Anaphora of our Holy father Mark the Apostle' which the trice blessed St. Kyrillos I established. The Liturgy is still used to this day, often prayed during Lent.

✦ ✦ THE MIA PHYSIS (THE ONE NATURE) ✦ ✦

The age-long Christological obstacles and problems which for many centuries used to separate the

Chalcedonian (451 AD) from the pre- or non-Chalcedonian Churches have been finally overcome through the persistent debates focusing around the famous ‘mia physis’ formula of St. Kyrillos. Indeed, for the first time since the Christological decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, Coptic theologians were able to discard the very issues that for centuries had alienated the Churches, both in the East and in the West. The champion of Orthodoxy, whose Christological formula eventually overcame the drawn out ecclesiastical stalemate, was St. Kyrillos. It was St. Kyrillos’ eloquent formulation of the ‘mia physis tou theou logou sesarkomenen’, that is ‘One Nature of the Incarnate Word’, that led to the agreed theological statements with the: Eastern Orthodox (1990-1993), Roman Catholic (1995), World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1998), Anglican Communion (2001) all building upon the formula of St. Kyrillos, “The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos”.

*** THE WRITINGS OF ST KYRILLOS ***

St. Kyrillos is one of the greatest figures of early Christian literature, whose writings reveal a depth of thought and richness of ideas, a precision and clarity of argument that prove the talent of the author, and make his writings first class sources of Christian doctrine.

Most of Pope Kyrillos’ writings deal with Biblical exegesis. St. Kyrillos was a prolific Biblical commentator, from him we have two large commentaries on the Pentateuch, the Adoration and Worship in Spirit and in Truth. The former treats passages from the books of Moses under theological themes, the fall of mankind, justification and redemption through Christ, love of God and love of neighbour. The latter expounds select passages from the Pentateuch, eg. Cain and Abel, Noah and the ark, Abraham, Isaac and Esau. St. Kyrillos also wrote verse by verse commentaries on the prophets and two are extant in their entirety, Isaiah and the Minor prophets. Also, commentaries on the Gospel of St. John and St. Matthew.

Some of his major works are:

- “On the Unity of the Person of Christ”
- “On the Holy and Consubstantial Holy Trinity”
- 29 Paschal Letters Between 414-442

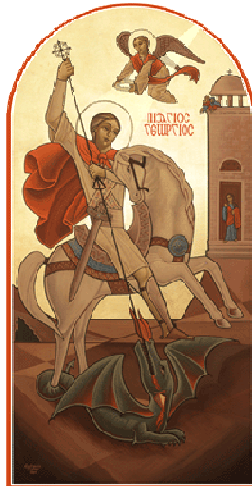
*** DEPARTURE TO HEAVEN ***

St. Kyrillos died 10th July, 444. Although not many Churches are named after him, there is in Australia’s first Coptic Church, St. Mary and St. Mina’s Cathedral in Sydney - a small chapel dedicated to St. Kyrillos I.

With vigor, clarity and theological insight he defended the reality of the human nature of the Divine Word and the Church’s practice of calling the Blessed Virgin St. Mary ‘Theotokos’ - St. Kyrillos is deserving of the title ‘Pillar of Faith’. “In the time of his us”, writes St. Kyrillos in one of his Paschal homilies, “when Christ became man for us, He reformed the whole nature in Himself to newness in life and transformed it to what it was from the beginning.”

May we continue to be enlightened and inspired by St. Kyrillos who courageously defended the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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St Kyrillos (Cyril)

The Pillar of Faith

Fr. Matthew Attia