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Modernity Meets Monasticism in Egypt's Desert

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By Will Rasmussen

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AL ZAAFARANA, Egypt (Reuters) - A speck of green in a sea of sand, St. Anthony's Monastery in Egypt welcomes those seeking God in silence broken only by the whisper of the wind.

Monks at what is considered by many to be the world's oldest active Christian monastery still rise before dawn to chant and pray just as their predecessors did for more than 1,500 years.

Now, they also carry mobile phones, send e-mails and maintain a website (<http://www.stanthonymonastery.org>), embracing modernity that has helped sustain the ancient monastery, nestled beside a spring where Egypt's eastern desert meets the craggy Red Sea mountains.

But the changes have sent some monks fleeing to a more austere existence in nearby mountain caves.

"There is nothing wrong with microwaves or mobile phones -- they save time," Egyptian monk Ruwais el-Anthony, who has lived at the monastery for more than 30 years, said through a bushy white beard. "But God will ask you what you have done with the time that was saved."

The monastery, which was founded in 356 AD, has survived Bedouin raids, the Islamic conquest of Egypt, and wars between Egypt and Israel that turned the area into a combat zone.

Almost all the monks here are Egyptian Coptic Christians, a minority faith in the most populous Arab country, which is about 90 percent Muslim. Most Christians in Egypt belong to the Coptic Orthodox church, which gives allegiance to its own Pope in Egypt, Shenouda III.

Once closed off from marauding Bedouins behind towering white stone walls, the monks now open iron doors, engraved with Coptic writing, to busloads of tourists and pilgrims.

The monks raise chickens, grow fruit, and lead tour groups through the compound's 15th century church, which is built above the oldest monk cells ever discovered, dating from the fourth century, the monks say.

Monks believe a recently discovered grave under the church is that of St. Anthony himself.

"When I came here, it was very primitive and totally isolated," monk Athansious el-Anthony, 62, said.

When he first arrived in the late 1960s, the only visitors were Egyptian soldiers demanding water during Egypt's war with Israel. The monastery was near the front-lines of fighting in the war, which began in 1967.

Now, a new road through the desert brings busloads of visitors, most from Europe and Russia.

Only the most gregarious of the 120 monks at St. Anthony's deal with visitors. The others isolate themselves in their rooms or spend their days praying in the caves.

One Australian monk is said to live in a cave above the monastery, only coming down for an hour or two a week.

FOLLOWING ANTHONY

Described as the earliest Christian monk, St. Anthony set off into the desert around the year 280 A.D. and settled in the mountain caves around this desert oasis.

He is considered to be one of the first Christians to withdraw completely from society, living in the desert with only animals for company.

His followers also find solace in the desert's solitude.

"I love the silence and I don't want to serve anything but God," says Domadios el-Anthony, a black-bearded Egyptian who has lived for the last five years in the monastery. "My life began when I came here."

"We hear so much about the wars and awful things in the world ... People now just want a relationship with God."

The monastery, about 155 km (100 miles) southeast of Cairo, is now attracting so many prospective monks that it plans to turn everyone down for now, in part to ensure that only the most dedicated actually join.

Only about five new monks a year are accepted, out of dozens who express interest, Ruwais says.

"Not having a job, not finding a wife, escaping family problems -- these are not reasons we accept," he says. "We put our novices under the microscope for three years, to make sure they are obedient."

At the monastery, bearded monks in black robes lead visitors through narrow paths between stone churches, monk cells, an ancient refectory monks say was built by the Roman emperor, Justinian, and a library containing over 1,700 manuscripts.

"It doesn't matter if we are modern monks or classic monks," says Ruwais, who coordinates tourist visits with a battered mobile phone. "What's important is the purity of your heart."

The "classic" monks only come down from the jagged mountains after the sun sets, the tourists leave, the chatter subsides, and only the howling of the wind across the sand can be heard.

(Writing by Will Rasmussen; editing by Clar Ni Chonghaile)

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