

Divine Liturgy II: Liturgy of the Word

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Having laid the Lamb upon the altar in the Offertory, the Church now turns her ear toward heaven. In the Liturgy of the Word, the Scriptures are opened and the voice of the Lord speaks to His people. The Pauline Epistle, the Catholic Epistle, the Acts of the Apostles, the Synaxarion of the saints, and finally the Holy Gospel itself are read in succession, carried on clouds of incense and announced by the processions of the priest through the midst of the people. Everything the Church does in this hour is meant to do one thing: to prepare us to hear the Lord, to receive the Word before we receive the Body, to become "fifth Gospels" written not on paper but on flesh. This lesson walks through the incense circuits, the hymns, and the five readings that make up the heart of the Liturgy of the Word.

The Shape of the Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is built around a single pattern: incense rising, Scripture proclaimed, Scripture proclaimed again in the language of the people, and all of it converging on the reading of the Holy Gospel. Everything else — the hymns, the censings, the processions — is a frame around that central encounter. The Word who became flesh is about to speak to us in His own voice.

The movement begins with Logos — the Coptic for "word" — and a brief rite for the catechumens, a remnant of the days when those preparing for baptism heard this part of the Liturgy before being dismissed to continue their instruction. Then come the five readings: the Pauline Epistle, the Catholic Epistle, the Praxis (Acts of the Apostles), the Synaxarion, and the Holy Gospel. Between them, the priest processes through the nave with the censer, filling the church with the sign of our prayers rising to God.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1:1, 14

The sections can be laid out as a single unbroken movement:

- **The Circuit of the Pauline Incense**

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- **The Hymn of the Censer (Entho te tishouri, Tishori, or Taisouri, according to the season)**
 - **The Hymn of the Intercessions**
 - **The Pauline Epistle — first in Coptic (Pavlos evok), then in the language of the people, with the hymn Apetjjk evol**
 - **The Catholic Epistle — first in Coptic (Katholikon), then in the language of the people**
 - **The Circuit of the Praxis Incense and the Praxis Response**
 - **The Praxis — first in Coptic, then in the language of the people**
 - **The Paralex on feasts and fasts, the Synaxarion on other days**
 - **The Trisagion**
 - **The Litany for the Gospel**
 - **The Coptic Psalm and Gospel, followed by the Psalm and Gospel in the language of the people**
 - **The sermon**

The First Circuit: Incense for the Pauline Epistle

The priest places five spoonfuls of incense in the censer. The number is not an accident. Five is the number of our senses, through which the world reaches our souls, and it is also the number of the wounds of Christ, through which salvation reaches the world. As the coals warm and the smoke begins to rise, the priest prays the three great litanies — for the Peace of the Church, for the Pope, and for the assemblies of the faithful. Only then does he carry the censer out from before the sanctuary into the midst of the people.

The procession is ordered. The Gospel is carried first, because it is the Lord Himself who precedes His servants. Then comes the Pope or the local bishop, then the priests, and finally the people. As Abouna moves through the church, he works hard. He walks the whole building, corner to corner, censuring altar and icon and people alike. This physical labor is not accidental either. It is an image of St. Paul, of whom the Church is about to read, who journeyed from city to city and sea to sea to preach the Gospel to every nation.

“Are they ministers of Christ? — I speak as a fool — I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often... in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles...” 2 Corinthians 11:23–26

While the priest censures, the congregation is called to repent. The rising smoke is the sign of what ought to be happening in the heart of every person in the church: the lifting up of prayer, the acknowledgment of sin, the turning of the face toward God.

“Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Psalm 141:2

The Hymns of the Censer and the Intercessions

The Church never censures in silence. As the priest moves, the congregation sings. The Hymn of the Censer is sung in three different forms according to the season of the year. *Entho te tishouri* — “Now the power” — is sung on the weekdays of Great Lent and during Jonah's Fast, when the tone is one of repentance. *Tishori* is sung on the weekends of Great Lent, on the Feast of the Cross, and on other fasting weekdays. *Taisouri* is sung on the rest of the days of the year. Each has its own tune and its own theological flavor, but all three have the same subject: the offering of our prayers to God through the sweet savor of the censer.

The censer itself is a living icon. Our fathers have taught us to see in it a small image of the Mother of God. The censer holds the burning coal without being consumed; so the Virgin held the fire of the Son of God in her womb without being harmed. The incense rising from the coal is the prayer of the saints carried up through her intercession to the throne of God.

“Rejoice, O Virgin, who received the fire of the Godhead and was not consumed; who conceived the Word of the Father in her womb, and gave Him birth without change.”
From the Coptic Theotokia

After the hymn of the censer comes the Hymn of the Intercessions. Here the Church calls upon the Theotokos, the angels, and the saints by name, asking them to carry our petitions with them into the presence of God. This is why, whenever the priest is censuring through the church, our hymns are always directed toward the heavenly ranks — Verses of Cymbals, Doxologies, the Hittens. The priest moves in an arc from left to right, a circular path that has neither beginning nor end, an icon of the infinite God. The bishop remains within the sanctuary, in the place of Christ in heaven; the serving priest moves outside the sanctuary, in the place of the angels and saints who minister to the Church below.

The Old Testament already knows this pattern of incense and intercession. When Aaron ran into the midst of the people with a censer and the plague was stopped, the Church received a picture of what happens every time the priest walks among us with the censer and prays for us:

“Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made

atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped.” Numbers 16:46–48

When the priest finishes the Pauline circuit, he returns to the altar and prays the prayer of confession on behalf of the people — invoking the mercy shown to the thief on the Cross and asking that the same mercy be shown to us "not according to our sins, but according to Your mercy." This is the moment for every heart in the church to lay down its burden.

The Pauline Epistle and the Catholic Epistle

The first reading is from the fourteen Epistles of St. Paul — Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. The reader is not just any deacon; by ancient custom the Pauline Epistle is read by the Aghnostos, the deacon whose rank is specifically that of reader. The reading is given first in Coptic and then in the language of the people, so that no one is left behind.

After the Pauline comes the Catholic Epistle. Catholic is a Greek word meaning "universal." These seven letters — James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude — are called universal because they were written not to a single community like Corinth or Philippi, but to the whole Church. They carry the voice of the Lord's own brothers and first disciples. Peter himself writes as a witness:

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” 2 Peter 1:16

Together the Pauline and Catholic readings give the Church the full voice of the apostolic witness — Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, speaking in the first voice; the pillars of the Twelve speaking in the second. Between them there is no contradiction, only the fullness of the Spirit.

The Second Circuit: Incense for the Praxis

After the Catholic Epistle, the priest begins a second incense circuit, known as the Praxis circuit. At the same time the congregation sings the Hymn of the Praxis, again directed to the saints, beginning with St. Mary. The pattern of incense, hymn, and procession now accompanies the reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

The direction of this circuit is the mirror of the first. The Pauline circuit goes from left to right, following the wide path that St. Paul walked across the Roman world; the Praxis circuit goes from right to left, following the shorter path of the Twelve Apostles as they returned from the Mount of Olives after the Ascension and began to preach in Judea and the surrounding cities. By giving each its own direction, the Church honors both journeys — the one centered on Jerusalem and the one that reached to the ends of the earth — and declares that neither is less than the other.

After completing the Praxis circuit, the priest does not immediately re-enter the sanctuary. Two reasons stand behind this custom. The first is that most of the Apostles did not return to Jerusalem; they died in the lands to which they were sent, martyrs in foreign soil. The priest's lingering outside the

sanctuary is a small sign of that scattering. The second is that by this point in the Liturgy the priest has made seven circuits of the altar — three in the Pauline circuit, one for the Mystery of the people's confession, and three in the Praxis circuit. Seven is the number of the days the children of Israel marched around Jericho before the walls fell.

"You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days... but the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times... and the wall of the city will fall down flat." Joshua 6:3-5

As the priest goes around the altar seven times and the incense fills the nave, the walls of sin and evil crumble in front of the Ark of the New Covenant. If ever there was a moment for the heart to open and cry out, this is it.

The Praxis and the Synaxarion

Praxis is a Greek word meaning "acts." The reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit-inspired history of the early Church — Peter preaching at Pentecost, Stephen laying down his life, Paul setting out from Antioch, the Gospel reaching Rome. The Church reads Acts in the Liturgy because what happened in those pages did not end there. The same Spirit who drove Peter into the streets of Jerusalem and Paul into the streets of Athens drives us into our own streets, our own families, our own workplaces. We are meant to read Acts and to step into it.

By long tradition, the ordination of bishops takes place immediately after the reading of the Praxis. The reason is theological, and it is beautiful. Of all twenty-seven books of the New Testament, the Book of Acts is the only one that does not end with "Amen." It closes abruptly, with Paul preaching in Rome "with all confidence, no one forbidding him" (Acts 28:31). The open ending is deliberate. The work of the Apostles is not finished. Every ordination of a bishop is the next chapter of Acts being written. The apostolic succession is the continuation of a book that the Holy Spirit has not yet closed.

On feasts and fasts the Church inserts a Paralex — an additional reading tied to the theme of the day. On other days she reads from the Synaxarion. Synaxarion is a Greek word meaning "the news," and the Fathers have called it the continuation of the Book of Acts. Each day of the Coptic calendar carries the memory of the saints who fell asleep on that day, and their lives are read out loud to the congregation. The Synaxarion is suspended only during Holy Week and the fifty days of the Resurrection, when the Church allows nothing to distract from the Paschal mystery itself.

The saints read out of the Synaxarion are not displayed as curiosities. They are held up as possibilities. The Church is telling us, day by day, that the life they lived is a life we can live. Holiness is not a museum exhibit. It is a calling.

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1

The Trisagion and the Litany for the Gospel

The congregation now chants the Trisagion — "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us." This is one of the oldest hymns of the Church. Tradition teaches that a form of it was sung by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus at the burial of the Lord, and behind that stands the ceaseless song of the Seraphim that Isaiah heard in the temple:

"And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!'" Isaiah 6:3

The Trisagion sums up the whole life of Christ in a few words. "Holy God" is a confession of His divinity. "Holy Mighty" is a confession of His incarnation in power. "Holy Immortal, have mercy on us" is the Church's cry to the One who has conquered death. The hymn serves as an introduction to the Gospel, which is the written account of the life of this Holy One.

After the Trisagion, the priest prays the Litany for the Gospel. In the litany he asks God to open our hearts and our minds, to remove the film from our eyes and the wax from our ears, so that we may hear what the Lord is about to speak. He prays this because he knows what the Lord Himself said to His disciples:

"But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." Matthew 13:16–17

The Psalm that follows is chanted as an announcement to the Word. The Psalms are full of Christ — His incarnation, His suffering, His resurrection, His reign. The Church reads them before the Gospel so that we hear the prophecy first and then the fulfillment. And when the Psalm is sung, the congregation responds with a single ancient word: Alleluia — "Praise the Lord."

Then the deacon lifts the Cross and sets it upon the Gospel, and commands the whole Church:

"Stand in the fear of God and listen to the Holy Gospel." From the Liturgy of the Catechumens

The Reading of the Holy Gospel

The priest stands facing east — toward the rising of the Sun of Righteousness — and reads the Gospel first in Coptic. Then the Gospel is read again, by a priest or archdeacon or reader, this time facing the people in the language they understand. The entire congregation stands. Slouching, hands in pockets, idle conversation — all of these are put aside. The Lord Himself is speaking to His Body.

Candles are held before the Gospel book. The light is not decoration. It is catechesis. The Psalmist had already said it:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Psalm 119:105

While the reader proclaims the Gospel in Arabic or English, the priest remains at the altar in silent prayer, offering incense. He asks the Holy Spirit to open the ears of the faithful, because hearing the

Gospel is not the same as understanding it. Understanding is a gift that descends upon us as surely as the incense rises.

Two currents meet here. The Word is proclaimed to the senses, and the Spirit is invoked upon the heart. The bread of Scripture is laid on the table, and the Spirit is asked to make it nourishment rather than mere data. This is the first Communion of the Liturgy — Communion with Christ through His Word — and it prepares us for the Communion that will come through His Body and Blood.

The Sermon and the Dismissal of the Catechumens

When the Gospel is finished, the people sit and the priest gives a sermon. The sermon is not a speech; it is the breaking of the Bread of Scripture. The priest is given the task of taking the Pauline reading, the Catholic reading, the Acts, the Psalm, and the Gospel of the day, and showing how they fit together, so that the congregation leaves knowing what the Lord has said to His Church in this Liturgy.

This is why our lectionary is not random. On Sundays, the five readings of the day are chosen to illuminate a common theme. On weekdays they are aligned with the commemoration of the saints in the Synaxarion. The preacher's duty is to draw the threads together into a single cloth.

The sermon is also the ancient boundary between the two halves of the Liturgy. In the early Church, the Liturgy of the Word was open to everyone — the baptized, the catechumens, and even interested inquirers. But once the sermon was finished, the archdeacon would call out in a loud voice, and the catechumens would be dismissed. From that point on, only the baptized remained. The Liturgy of the Believers was for those who had entered the Body of Christ through the water and the Spirit, and only they could partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

The Coptic Church has kept the memory of this dismissal in her rubrics and in her heart. We no longer routinely send catechumens away at this point, but the theological truth remains: the Liturgy of the Word trains everyone, but the Liturgy of the Faithful feeds only the family. What we are about to enter is the Holy of Holies, and we do not enter it casually.

“Every listening and acting believer becomes a fifth Gospel.” Traditional Coptic saying

To hear the Gospel and not live it is to build a house upon sand. To hear it and live it is to let the Lord write His own life into ours, so that when the world reads our days they read Christ in them. The Liturgy of the Word is not finished until we leave the church looking more like Him than when we came in.

“You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ... written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.” 2 Corinthians 3:2–3



Review Questions

1. The Liturgy of the Word is broken down into which sections? (A: Logos, Catechumen, 5 Readings, Incense.)
2. What should the congregation be doing during the prayer of Incense for the Pauline Epistle? (A: The congregation should be repenting during this time)
3. What does the censer and hot charcoal represent? (A: St. Mary represents the censer and Christ is the hot charcoal in the bottom of the censer)
4. Why do we sing the hymn of the intercession? (A: We sing the hymn of the intercession because incense represents the prayers of the saints who take our requests up to heaven.)
5. True or False, the book of Acts ends with 'Amen'? (A: False)
6. What does the Synaxarion mean and what does it represent? (A: It is the Greek word meaning "The News" and it is the Chronicles of the Saints. Considered the continuation of the Book of Acts)
7. What does the Trisagion represent? (A: The life of Christ. This hymn serves as an introduction to the Gospel which is the written account of the life of Christ.)
8. What do the candles during the reading of the Gospel represent? (A: Candles are held in front of the Gospel to represent that God's word/life is a "lamp to our feet and a light to our path...")



Books & References

Scripture:

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V (on the washing of hands and the Eucharist).
- St. John Chrysostom — Homilies on the Gospels and on the Pauline Epistles.
- Fr. Athanasius Iskander, [Understanding the Liturgy](#).
- Fr. Tadros Malaty, The Divine Liturgy: An Introduction.
- https://www.suscopts.org/ssc/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/01-Raising_of_Incense.pdf

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.