

Feast of the Cross

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Twice a year the Coptic Orthodox Church lights its candles and sings its joyful Shanini tune for a feast that celebrates, of all things, an instrument of execution. The Feast of the Cross is a Feast of the Lord because the Cross is not a tragedy but an altar. On it the Son offered Himself for the life of the world. Through it paradise was reopened. In this lesson we walk the history that the Church gathers up on 17 Thout and 10 Paramhat: Constantine's vision at the Milvian Bridge, St. Helen's patient search in the garbage-heap of Jerusalem, and the long warfare by which Heraclius brought the Cross home again after the Persians carried it away. We listen to the Fathers who first testified that the True Cross had been found. We follow the twelve Gospels of the Procession of the Cross through the church, from the altar to the icons of the saints to the doors of the nave, each station lifting up another shape of the one Cross. And we finish, as St. Ephraim the Syrian finished, with the sign of the living Cross sealed upon every doorway, every meal, every sleeping and waking, — for there is no guardian like it.

The Importance of the Cross

The Cross stands at the center of the Christian faith not as decoration but as the very instrument of our redemption. It is the altar on which the Son of God offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. St. Paul the Apostle teaches us to keep this feast not as a sorrowful memory but as the joy of our salvation, — and this is how the Church has always received his words.

“For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Corinthians 5:7–8

St. John Chrysostom, the Golden Mouth, draws our attention to that word keep the feast. The Apostle does not say, endure the Cross; he says celebrate it. The Cross is a wedding, a Passover, the marriage of heaven and earth sealed in the Blood of the Lamb. Wherever the Cross stands, there the altar of the world stands.

St. Basil the Great teaches the same truth in the Anaphora of his Liturgy. As we pray it today we say of the Lord Jesus Christ,

“He descended into Hades through the Cross.” — St. Basil the Great, Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy

Through the Cross the Lord stepped into the realm of the dead and broke its gates. Through the Cross He reopened the paradise that Adam had shut. Through the Cross He poured out on His Church the sign of strength and salvation. This is why the Roman gibbet became, for the faithful, a throne, a

weapon, a banner, and a key. What the world used to end a life, God used to open eternal life for every race and tongue.

The Two Feast Days: 17 Thout and 10 Paramhat

The observance of the Feast of the Cross began in Jerusalem, where Cross, tomb, and resurrection are pressed into the same small piece of ground, and from Jerusalem it spread into every local church. The Coptic Orthodox Church keeps the Feast twice a year. The first celebration falls on 17 Thout, in the Coptic month corresponding to late September, and is observed for three full days. The second falls on 10 Paramhat, in late March or early April, and is kept for a single day.

Two feasts instead of one is not an accident. Three great events are gathered behind them. The first is the vision of the Cross given to the Emperor Constantine before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. The second is the finding of the True Cross by St. Helen in Jerusalem in 326 AD, together with the consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The third is the restoration of the Cross to Jerusalem in 630 AD, after the Emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians who had carried it away. The first two events are tied to 17 Thout. The third is tied to 10 Paramhat. Every year the Church lets us walk through all three.

“God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Galatians 6:14

The First Event: Constantine at the Milvian Bridge (312 AD)

In the early fourth century the city of Rome groaned under the tyranny of Maxentius, who was allied with Maximianus II. The nobles of the city sent word to Constantine, begging him to come and deliver them. He gathered his army and began the long march south.

According to the fifth-century historian Sozomen, a marvel interrupted that march. In the full light of day Constantine saw above him a great Cross composed of stars, and on it was written in Greek letters the promise, With this you shall conquer. That night an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, Make for yourself a sign like that sign which you have seen, and with it you shall conquer your enemies. In the morning the Emperor ordered a large standard to be made, bearing the Cross of Christ at its head.

He went into battle under that banner and defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. The significance of this event is not military. It is that the first Christian emperor of Rome was brought to the faith not by argument but by the sign of the Cross, and that the sign of the Cross became publicly what it had always been spiritually — the standard under which the Church would march. From that moment the long centuries of persecution began to give way. The Church came out of the catacombs because the Cross had gone ahead of her into the imperial court.

The Second Event: St. Helen's Finding of the Cross (326 AD)

In the year 326 AD the Empress Helen, Constantine's mother, traveled to Jerusalem with three thousand soldiers, resolved not to return until she had uncovered the Cross of her Lord. After the

Resurrection, many miracles had been worked at the tomb of Christ. The authorities in Jerusalem, intending to conceal what they could not explain, had thrown down the three crosses of Golgotha into a single pile beside the tomb and had heaped garbage upon them for almost two hundred years. According to Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, the Emperor Hadrian later built a temple to Venus on the same site. When St. Helen arrived, she labored greatly to uncover what many centuries had tried to bury.

During her search she met an elderly Jewish man named Judas who had inherited from his forefathers the knowledge of where the Cross lay. At first he refused to speak. When she pressed him, he at last led her to the place. Her soldiers cleared away the mountain of refuse and dug, and they brought up three crosses. One of them still bore the titulus over it, the plaque Pilate had nailed in place above Christ's head: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

Even then, to be certain of which Cross was the Lord's, the Empress waited for a funeral procession to pass by. She laid the first cross on the body of the dead man, and nothing happened. She laid the second, and nothing. When she laid the third — the Cross that bore the Name — the dead man rose, living, in front of her. She fell down and worshipped the Cross, and she called the Christians of the city to come and receive its blessing.

This is the account the Coptic Church has kept, drawn chiefly from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen. Other historians preserve the same event with small differences. Socrates Scholasticus, writing in the fifth century, reports that the miracle was not the raising of a dead man but the healing of a gravely ill woman, and adds that St. Helen also found the holy nails by which the Lord was fastened to the Cross. Theodoret agrees with Sozomen on the main outline but specifies that Macarius, the Bishop of Jerusalem, was the one who placed the three crosses upon the sick woman.

Judas, the elderly Jew who had led her to the place, was so overcome by what he had seen that he believed in Christ. He was baptized and took the name Keriakos. He was later consecrated Bishop of Jerusalem, and in the fourth century, under the persecution of Julian the Apostate, he gave up his life for the same Cross he had once concealed. The story does not end with a relic. It ends with a shepherd.

Empress Helen built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre over the ground she had uncovered, and the dedication of that church is one of the events folded into the Feast of 17 Thout. From that day the Cross was no longer hidden, and fragments of it were carried across the known world.

The Third Event: The Persian Capture and the Return of the Cross (614–630 AD)

In 614 AD, during the reign of Khosrau II, Emperor of Persia, the Persian general Shahrbaraz marched into Jerusalem, burned the Church of the Resurrection, and on May 15 of that year carried off the Holy Cross to Persia. At the same time the Roman Empire was ruled by Heraclius. Unwilling to let the Cross remain a trophy in a foreign land, Heraclius set out in 622 AD on a long campaign. The war lasted six years. In 629 AD Heraclius entered Constantinople victorious and received the Cross from Hierapolis, where the Persians had kept it, and on March 21, 630 AD, the Cross was returned in procession to the Holy Land.

The Church remembers this day on 10 Paramhat. It is the feast of a Cross that travels and comes home. It is a feast of the perseverance of faith under armies and empires, and of the truth that the Cross cannot be lost. The world may carry it away for a season; the Spirit always brings it back.

The Fathers on the Finding of the Cross

The earliest mention of the finding of the Cross in the writings of the Fathers comes from St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315–386 AD). In a sermon preached in the Church of the Resurrection in 348 AD — only two decades after the discovery — he speaks plainly about the witnesses the Lord has raised up to His Passion, and he adds,

“The holy wood of the Cross bears witness, seen among us to this day, and from this place now almost filling the whole world, by means of those who in faith take portions from it.” — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 10.19

Two things are worth noticing. First, St. Cyril speaks to a congregation standing on the very ground where St. Helen had labored. He is not passing on a rumor; he is pointing to something visible in the city. Second, he says that the Cross is already almost filling the whole world, because pilgrims are carrying portions of it home with them. Already, one generation after the finding, the Cross had become a gift the Church of Jerusalem was giving away to the nations.

St. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), preaching a few decades later, explains how three crosses came to be lying together and how the Lord's was recognized.

“For since the wood of the cross was buried, because no one was careful to take it up, inasmuch as fear was pressing, and the believers were hurrying to their urgent matters, and since it was after times to be sought for, it was likely that three crosses would lie together. In order that the Lord's might not be unknown, it was made manifest to all, first by its lying in the middle, and then by the title.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 85 on the Gospel of John

Chrysostom gives a quiet answer to an ancient objection. How could the faithful have left the Cross where it fell on the day of the Crucifixion? His answer is sober and honest: because fear was pressing, and the disciples scattered, and in the urgency of those days no one thought to take it up. The Lord Himself saw to it that when the Church was ready for the Cross again, the Cross would be ready for her — by its place and by its title.

The Rites of the Feast

All the ritual books of the Church treat the Feasts of the Cross as Feasts of the Lord. If the Feast falls on a Sunday, the readings of the Feast are prayed, and the regular Sunday readings are set aside. The Feast takes precedence.

In his canons, Pope Cyril III (known as Ibn Laqlaq), who lived in the thirteenth century, ranks the Feast of the Cross as a major Feast of the Lord, and in the same canon he gives only 17 Thout as the date. Ibn

Sebaa, writing in the same century, gives both 17 Thout and 10 Paramhat, and also numbers the Feast among the twelve major Feasts. By the fourteenth century, Ibn Kabar the priest still lists both dates, but now places the Feast among the seven minor Feasts of the Lord. This is the moment the change begins. The Islamic scholar al-Qalqashandi, writing in the fifteenth century, confirms from outside the Church that the Copts of his day celebrated the Feast of the Cross as a minor Feast of the Lord.

Why did the Feast move from the list of the major Feasts to the list of the minor, and eventually off the formal list altogether? The Church added the Wedding of Cana of Galilee to the list of minor Feasts of the Lord and, because she was determined to keep the number at seven, the Feasts of the Cross were the ones released. Even so, no Copt ever stopped treating them as Feasts of the Lord. The name on the list changed; the practice did not. We still sing the hymns of the Lord on these days.

Tunes and Hymns: The Shanini and Etaven Niesekhai

The Feast of the Cross is prayed in the Shanini tune, the distinct and unmistakably joyful melody that the Church reserves for the Feasts of the Cross and for Palm Sunday. The hymn specially dedicated to the Cross is called Etaven Niesekhai, and it has a particular place in the service. It is chanted in Vespers and Matins after the priest prays Efnouti Nai Nan with the three candles, and it is chanted in the Liturgy after the Synaxarion and again during Communion.

The hymn remembers the day when Constantine's letters of peace arrived in Alexandria, bearing the imperial decree,

“Shut the doors of the temples, and open the doors of the churches; shut the demons' houses, and open God's houses. Blessed are these people, who were told this commandment. Blessed are you, O Constantine, for you revived the faith, therefore God gave you life in the kingdom of heavens. Pray to the Lord on our behalf, my lord King Constantine, and Queen Helen, that He may forgive us our sins.” — from the hymn Etaven Niesekhai

When the Church sings this hymn she does not merely remember a fourth-century event. She stands in the Alexandria of that day, hearing the imperial letter read aloud. The bishops rejoice. The priests become glad. The seven orders of the Church glorify the God of heaven. And the hymn asks us, What bodily tongue can speak of the joy of the faithful people in all the churches? The Feast of the Cross is a door that opens backward into the exact moment the Cross stopped being a secret and came out into the open air.

The Procession of the Cross: Twelve Stations, One Cross

Before the printing press, each church and region kept its own order for the Procession of the Cross. The number of Gospels, the places where they were read, and the responses that followed them all differed from town to town. Today the Procession is fixed. The priest carries the Cross in procession through the nave of the church, pausing at twelve stations. At each station a Gospel is read. Each Gospel lifts up a different face of the one Cross.

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- First, before the high altar — the Cross as altar. From this Cross we eat the Body and drink the Blood of the Lord.
 - Second, before the icon of St. Mary — the cross of faithful submission. She was the first to bear the Cross with her Son. Let it be done to me according to your Word (Luke 1:38). And a sword will pierce your soul also (Luke 2:35).
 - Third, before the icon of the Archangel Gabriel — the cross of the path. He is the servant of the mystery of the Incarnation, the first step on the road to Golgotha.
 - Fourth, before the icon of the Archangel Michael — the cross of victory. He is the servant of the mystery of the Resurrection.
 - Fifth, before the icon of St. Mark — the cross of mission and evangelism. He taught our Church the mystery of the Cross.
 - Sixth, before the icon of the Apostles — the cross of service and martyrdom, the sacrifice of those who laid the foundations of the Church.
 - Seventh, before the icon of St. George or another martyr — the cross of martyrdom, submission to persecution and the shedding of blood.
 - Eighth, before the icon of St. Anthony or another saint of the church — the cross of spiritual struggle, monasticism, and perfect honesty in seeking the Kingdom of God.
 - Ninth, before the northern door — the door through which the catechumens of old entered when they believed in Christ. It is the cross of hearty faith, the soul taken under the protection of the only Redeemer.
 - Tenth, before the Laqqan (the basin for the washing of feet, set in the last third of the nave) — the cross of humility, of the Lord on His knees before His disciples.
 - Eleventh, before the southern door — the door where in the early centuries the deacon received the offerings of the faithful for the poor. It is the cross of donation, the cross of love's perfect sacrifice.
 - Twelfth, before the icon of St. John the Baptist — the cross of witnessing the truth and abstaining from the world and its authority.

The Procession is a small pilgrimage inside the walls of the church. The Cross goes ahead of us, and we follow it from the altar out to the doors. At each station we are asked, what would it cost you to carry this Cross here? at the altar, in faith, on the mission field, under persecution, in humility, in charity, in witness? The twelve Gospels are not twelve different Crosses. They are the one Cross, unfolded, so that every member of the Body can find the shape of it that fits his own life.

Fai Etaf Enf: This Is He Who Offered Himself

At the very heart of the Feast the Church sings Fai Etaf Enf,

“This is He who presented Himself on the Cross; an acceptable sacrifice for the salvation of our race. His good Father inhaled His sweet aroma in the evening on Golgotha.” — from the hymn Fai Etaf Enf

Every word of this hymn is worth weighing. This is He who presented Himself — not He who was dragged, not He who was overcome, not He who was caught. He presented Himself, freely, deliberately, as a priest carries his offering to the altar. An acceptable sacrifice — the Old Testament longed for the offering that would finally satisfy, the pure lamb without blemish, the morning and evening sacrifice that would not need to be repeated. His good Father inhaled His sweet aroma — the language comes straight out of the Law, where the pleasing aroma of the burnt offering rose up to God. In the evening on Golgotha — the very hour of the evening sacrifice, the very hour the Temple was preparing its own offerings, the Lord on the Cross gave up His spirit and the Father received the one Sacrifice that makes all other sacrifices unnecessary.

When the Church sings Fai Etaf Enf, she is not describing a sad event from far away. She is telling us what the Cross is: the altar of a willing Priest, the offering of a perfect Son, and a Father who inhales and is pleased.

Living the Feast: The Sign of the Cross in Every Hour

St. Ephraim the Syrian (303–373 AD) sums up the whole Feast and its meaning for daily life in a single instruction to his son. It is the one lesson we should carry home from the Feast of the Cross.

“With the sign of the living cross, seal all your doings, my son. Do not leave the door of your house till you have signed the cross. Whether in eating or in drinking, whether in sleeping or in waking, whether in your house or on the road, or again in the season of leisure, neglect not this sign; for there is no guardian like it. It shall be to you as a wall, in the forefront of all your doings. And teach this to your children, so that heedfully they may be conformed to it.” — St. Ephraim the Syrian

St. Ephraim speaks as a father, and he speaks with tenderness. He does not ask for heroic austerity. He asks for a gesture: the sign of the Cross on the forehead, on the chest, on the doorpost, at the table, over the cup of water, before sleep, at the moment of waking. He says there is no guardian like it. He promises that the Cross, placed before all our doings, will stand like a wall at the front of the day. And he asks us to hand this on — to teach our children to be conformed to the sign of the Cross, so that it is not a ritual memorized in childhood but a reflex they cannot lose.

This is what the Feast of the Cross is for. It is not a commemoration of a Roman gibbet, or of an imperial victory, or of a moment in church history. It is the annual renewal of the sign by which we live. We lift up the Cross over our altars, over our icons, over our doors. We lift up the Cross over our days. And in that sign, as Constantine was told, we shall conquer.



Review Questions

1. How did St. Helen decide which one was the real cross? (A: She used a passing funeral procession to see which cross raised one of the men.)
2. What are two important event dates? (A: The 10th of Paramhotep, and the 17th of Thout.)
3. Who is Fai Etaf Enf? (A: It is He who presented Himself on the Cross.)
4. Where is the second one of the procession read? (A: It is read in front of the icon of St. Mary.)
5. Where is the seventh one of the procession read? (A: It is read in front of the icon of St. George or any other martyr.)



Books & References

Scripture:

- 1 Corinthians 5:7–8 — 'Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.'
- Galatians 6:14 — 'God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.'
- Luke 1:38; Luke 2:35 — the Virgin Mary as the first to bear the Cross.
- Matthew 26; John 19 — the Passion narratives of the Lord.

Further Reading:

- St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 10.19.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 85 on the Gospel of John.
- St. Basil the Great, Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy (Coptic Rite).
- St. Ephraim the Syrian on the sign of the Cross.
- Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History; Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History; Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History; Eusebius, Life of Constantine.
- Pope Cyril III (Ibn Laqlaq), Canons; Ibn Sebaa; Ibn Kabar, Lamp of Darkness.
- [Feast of the Cross, Pope Shenouda](#)

All Scripture quoted from the New King James Version.