

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.

Midnight Praises

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The Midnight Praises are the Church awake in the middle of the night, training herself for heaven. They are the hinge between the day that has ended and the Liturgy that is coming. They are the work that the angels already do, that our fathers have taught us to do alongside them. In this lesson we study the Psalmody that shapes this vigil: its Jewish roots in the Book of Psalms, the four Hos-es that lead us from the Red Sea to the heavenly Jerusalem, the Lobsh that explains what we have just sung, the Psali that names the Lord in every verse, the Theotokia that gathers the Old and New Testaments around the Mother of God, and the Doxology that glorifies the saints and the feasts. We learn the difference between the Adam days and the Watos days. We learn why watchfulness — not emotion, not music — is the theme. And we learn why our fathers rose in the middle of the night to do this: because the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and those who keep watch will open the door to Him.

Introduction to Praising

Praise is not a decoration on the edges of the Church's life. It is one of her chief works. It is the meeting-place of the Struggling Church still on earth and the Victorious Church already in heaven. It is also the proper work of the angels, and when we join them we are stepping, for a moment, into their office.

“Praise Him, all His angels; praise Him, all His hosts!” Psalm 148:2

When we lift our voices in the middle of the night, we are not alone. The angels are already praising. The saints are already praising. We are training our lips for the language we will speak forever. And we are making ready for the banquet of the King, because the Divine Liturgy always follows the Praises, and the Praises prepare the heart that will receive the Body and the Blood.

This is not a medieval invention. We see it in the earliest Church in Jerusalem, where the first believers carried their worship from the Temple to each other's homes.

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God.” Acts 2:46–47

The Church of the Apostles was a Church that praised. The midnight vigil simply carries that first impulse into the quietest hour of the night, where the distractions of the day have fallen away and nothing is left but the voice that says, Lord, have mercy.

Praise as Living Sacrifice

St. Paul tells us what worship is. It is not a performance; it is an offering. It is the whole self brought to the altar.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Romans 12:1

In the Divine Liturgy the deacon says of our offering, A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise. The sacrifice of praise is the particular name for what we do in the Psalmody. It is the lifting of the heart and the lifting of the hands at the hour when the world is asleep.

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

The sacrifice of praise is offered with the body. God prepared a body for His Son precisely so that the Son could offer it.

"Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me." Hebrews 10:5

We follow the Lord in this. We do not send our prayers from a distance. We bring our bodies to the vigil. We stand when we could sit. We sing when we could sleep. And the reward of this small sacrifice is eternal.

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." Hebrews 13:15

The Heavenly Connection

We never praise God alone. The Psalmist already knew this.

"I will praise You with my whole heart; before the gods I sing praises to You." Psalm 138:1

And we pray toward the day when the dividing wall between the Struggling Church and the Victorious Church falls away altogether, and the praise of the saints becomes our praise too.

"Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty firmament! ... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Psalm 150:1, 6

When we sing the Midnight Praises we are not making sound into an empty room. We are joining a chorus that never stops. The angels are singing Holy, holy, holy. The saints are singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The voice of our small congregation, alone in the dark church, is caught up into that unbroken song.

Praising at Midnight

The service of praising came into the Church from the Jewish tradition, in which the Book of Psalms was the chief prayer-book of the people of God. The Psalmody is the Church's continuation of that tradition, expanded by the Holy Spirit into hymns that the Old Testament could only point toward.

St. Basil the Great explains why this particular work draws heaven so near:

“The work of praising attracts the service of the angels, because this is part of their job, and they come closer to those who do the same as they.” — St. Basil the Great

The angels, whose proper office is to praise, are drawn to the souls who praise. When we imitate their work, they come near. This is why the fathers chose the midnight hour for this vigil. It was the hour of the Bridegroom's coming. It was the hour when distractions had been stripped away. It was the hour the Lord spent in Gethsemane, when His disciples could not watch with Him even one hour. To rise at midnight is to answer, Yes, Lord, we will watch with You now.

The Psalmody is not a collection of songs. It is a deep spiritual monument, built on the shape of the Holy Liturgy, placed in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its words come from the Bible — especially the Psalms — and from profound theology held in the Theotokias and the Psalis. Its tunes are a language of their own. It is a whole world, and the rest of this lesson is a walk through its rooms.

Terminology: The Language of the Psalmody

Before we walk through the Midnight Praises, we learn the Church's vocabulary.

- Psalmody — the book of praises itself. The annual Psalmody contains all the praises prayed during the year. The Kiahk Psalmody is much fuller and is prayed during the month of Kiahk in preparation for the Nativity. The Church also keeps a Lenten Psalmody, a Resurrection/Pentecost Psalmody, and an Apostles' Psalmody.
- Hos (plural Hos-es) — a Coptic word meaning praise. Four Hos-es are prayed in the Midnight Praises.
- Lobsh — a Coptic word meaning explanation. Two Lobsh-es are prayed, one after the First Hos and one after the Second, drawing out the meaning of what has just been sung.
- Psali — from a Greek word meaning song. There are Psalis for the Lord, for the Virgin Mary, for the Three Holy Youth (sung after the Third Hos), and for the saints and the seasons of the Church.
- Theotokia — from the Greek Theotokos, Mother of God. There is one Theotokia for each day of the week. The Theotokias were introduced by St. Cyril of Alexandria after the Council of Ephesus refuted the heresy of Nestorius.
- Doxology — from the Greek meaning glorification or veneration. A Doxology may be offered for any saint or angel, for any feast or any fast.

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- Antiphonarium (Defnar) — from the Greek for a book of antiphons. An antiphon is a psalm, anthem, or verse sung by two choirs answering each other, and the Defnar contains a brief life and veneration of the saint of each day.

Adam Days and Watos Days

The Midnight Praises change with the day of the week. The Church divides her week into Adam days and Watos days.

Adam is the Coptic word for the name Adam, and it signifies a musical structure of six beats to the measure. It also names the first three days of the week — Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday — together with their hymns and tunes. The name is taken from the first word of the Monday Theotokia, Adam eti efoi, While Adam was sad.

Watos is the Coptic word meaning bush, and it signifies a musical structure of eight beats to the measure. It names the last four days of the week — Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday — together with their hymns and tunes. The name is taken from the first word of the Thursday Theotokia, Pivatos eta Moisis, The bush which Moses has seen.

Two tempos, two moods, two tunings of the same heart. Six beats for Adam, the fallen and rising man. Eight beats for the Bush that burned and was not consumed. Both lead to the same altar.

The Shape of the Midnight Praises

The Psalmody begins where the Agpeya begins: with the psalms of the midnight hours. These are not additions before the real service. They are the first entrance into the service. Following them come the three watches of Gethsemane, each with its own Gospel.

- First watch — the foolish virgins who had no oil. The warning of unreadiness.
- Second watch — the oil used, the sins forgiven, the lamp trimmed again.
- Third watch — the urgent command to stay awake, to watch, because we know neither the day nor the hour.

After the three watches the Church sings Ten Theno. The opening of this hymn is drawn out in a long, contemplative tune, and then the rest of the hymn continues at its normal pace. Ten Theno is composed of pieces drawn from the midnight hour prayers and from the prayers that follow Psalm 50 (Have mercy upon me, O God). The name itself is an invitation:

“Arise, O children of the light, let us praise the Lord of hosts.” — from the hymn Ten Theno

The Church does not wake her children gently. She calls them the children of the light and commands them to rise.

Watchfulness: The Theme of the Praises

The theme of the Midnight Praises is not praise itself. It is watchfulness. Watchfulness is the condition in which praise becomes possible.

“In Your light we see light.” Psalm 36:9

To be watchful is to stand in the light of Christ, and in that light the person of Christ is revealed, and the revealed Christ becomes the reason for praise. Watchfulness is not anxiety. It is attention. It is the opposite of the sleep of the spirit. The word watch is one of the most frequent words in the New Testament for a reason. Our Lord repeats it to the Apostles in Gethsemane. Watch and pray. Could you not watch with Me one hour? The Midnight Praises are the Church's answer to that question. Yes, Lord. For at least this one hour, every night, we can.

Watchfulness does not end when the Praises end. It becomes a way of walking. The pre-servant who learns to stay awake with the Lord at midnight will find herself staying awake with Him through the rest of the week.

Tennav: Let Us Look at the Resurrection

After Ten Theno the Church sings Tennav, which means Let us look at the resurrection of Christ. Tennav is prayed from the Feast of the Resurrection through the Fifty Holy Days of Pentecost, and after that on every Sunday until the end of the month of Hatour. The effect is quiet but strong: through most of the year the Church is allowed to remain with the open tomb.

The fathers taught that the person who stays up and watches in her spiritual life will one day see Christ the way St. Mary Magdalene saw Him on the morning of the Resurrection — first as a stranger, then, at the calling of her name, as the risen Lord. To sing Tennav is to rehearse that morning. At the end of Hatour the Church begins her cycle again, walking through the life of Christ day by day until His Ascension, so that the yearly calendar is itself a long act of watching.

The First Hos: The Hymn of Victory (Exodus 15)

The Psalmody itself begins with the First Hos, taken from the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus. This is the hymn Moses and Israel sang after they crossed the Red Sea dry-shod and watched the hand of the Lord close the waters over Pharaoh's chariots. It was the song of a people who had been slaves and who were now free.

“Your right hand, O Lord, is glorious in power; Your right hand, O Lord, has dashed the enemy in pieces.” Exodus 15:6

For the Church, the Red Sea is not only a body of water in Sinai. It is a figure of Holy Baptism. Pharaoh is a figure of the devil. The Israelites coming up out of the sea are a figure of every soul that has been baptized and has come up out of the water into the freedom of the children of God. Whenever we sing the First Hos we are singing the song of the one who has been rescued.

St. John saw the same song sung in heaven, by those who had finished the race:

“They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’” Revelation 15:3

The Earthly Church and the Heavenly Church are singing the same hymn. We sing it every day because, after the Resurrection, we have authority over Satan and because, by the grace of God, we will keep singing it until the Lord returns.

The Second Hos: Psalm 135, the Hymn of Thanksgiving

The Second Hos is Psalm 135. Its setting is the wilderness, the years between the Red Sea and the Promised Land. The world we live in is our wilderness. We have been delivered; we have not yet arrived. In this in-between we are asked to do what the Israelites mostly failed to do: to give thanks.

The Second Hos teaches the Struggling Church her most basic discipline. Deliverance has already happened. The Promised Land is not yet here. The right response is not grumbling but thanksgiving. The Hos repeats, like a heartbeat, the line *For His mercy endures forever*. The mercy that led Israel out of Egypt is the mercy that leads us through each day of the week. The Second Hos is the answer the wilderness generation did not know how to give, and it is placed into our mouths so that we will learn to give it.

The Third Hos: The Praise of the Three Holy Youth

The Third Hos is drawn from Daniel 3, the hymn of the three young men in the fiery furnace. Cast into the fire for refusing to worship the golden image, they were met in the middle of the flames by a fourth figure like a Son of God, and they walked unharmed. Out of the furnace they sang a hymn that commanded every part of creation to praise the Lord.

“Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord; praise and exalt Him above all forever.”
Song of the Three Holy Youth

The Third Hos is the New Testament Hos, because the fourth figure in the furnace is Christ. It carries forty verses, and forty is the number of perfection — the forty days of the Lord's fast and His victory over the tempter, the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, the forty-day fast of Moses on Sinai. The Third Hos teaches us the Orthodox understanding of peace. Peace is not the absence of trial. Peace is the presence of Christ in the middle of the trial. In the furnace, with the Fourth Man walking beside us, we can command all creation to praise.

Tenen: Teach Us to Be Living Sacrifices

Tenen is the praise that follows, and it turns again to the three holy youth. It asks us to be living sacrifices as they were — willing to walk into the fire rather than bow to the image.

The act of the vigil itself is the first step of that sacrifice. The very thing we are doing at midnight — staying up, praying, praising when our bodies would rather sleep — is a small fire we have chosen to walk into. Tenen does not teach us an abstract theory of sacrifice. It tells us what to do with the hour

we are in. Offer this one. Begin here. The three youths who stood in the fire of Nebuchadnezzar were the same kind of soul as the pre-servant who stands in the dim light of a church at midnight, praying when she could be sleeping. This is where living sacrifice begins.

The Commemoration of the Saints

After the Third Hos the Church turns to the saints. We ask the Victorious Church to pray for the Struggling Church. We gather into one prayer the whole family of God — the prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles and martyrs of the New, the fathers of the monasteries and the deserts, the holy virgins and confessors.

The Commemoration of the Saints is not a pause in the Praises. It is the joining of the choirs. Through the first three Hos-es we have walked from the Red Sea (the Old Testament), through Psalm 135 (the wilderness of this life), to the fiery furnace (the Lord Incarnate with His own). Now we reach the choir that stands beyond the veil. The saints are not watching us from a distance. They are praying with us, and we ask them to.

The Fourth Hos: A Symphony of Heavenly Praise (Psalms 148–150)

The Fourth Hos is Psalms 148, 149, and 150. Some of our fathers say that with the end of these three psalms the first half of the Tasbeha is complete, and before the Fourth Hos resumes the Church repeats Eleison imas, Have mercy on us, as if washing her face again before walking into the throne-room.

The Fourth Hos is the praise of heaven. Here the worshipper has crossed the Red Sea, has passed through the wilderness with thanksgiving, has stood in the furnace with the Fourth Man, and has been gathered with the saints. She now stands, in spirit, in the heavenly Jerusalem, where praise is the native language of the angels. The Fourth Hos is the command that every order of being — sun and moon, stars and clouds, sea creatures and mountains, kings and all peoples, young men and virgins, old men and children — lift up the same voice.

We praise Him because He has made us like the angels. We praise Him because He has allowed us to join the Victorious Church. We praise Him because the Fourth Hos is already happening, and He has graciously let us in.

The Psali: The Name of Christ in Every Verse

After the Fourth Hos the Church sings the Psali. The Psali is a poem of praise whose signature is the constant, unbroken repetition of the Name of Christ in its verses.

The Psali begins by praising the Creator — the God who brought all things out of nothing. Then it praises His Mother, the Theotokos, through whom He came into His own creation. The repetition of the Name of Christ is not mechanical. It is an anchor. The mind of the worshipper drifts easily at midnight. The Psali drops the Name of Jesus like a chain into the deep of her soul and ties her to Him. Every

verse, the Name again. Every phrase, the Name again. Slowly the mind stops wandering. Slowly the heart begins to notice that the Name it is repeating is also the Name it loves.

The Theotokia: Symbols of St. Mary in the Old and New Testaments

The Theotokia is the last great hymn of the Psalmody before its closing prayers, and it is one of the tallest mountains in the whole Coptic liturgical tradition. There is a different Theotokia for each day of the week, introduced by St. Cyril of Alexandria after the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, when the Church's faith in the Theotokos, the Mother of God, was defended against the heresy of Nestorius.

The Theotokia gathers into a single hymn all the symbols of the Virgin Mary that the Old and New Testaments give us: the Burning Bush that was not consumed, the Ladder of Jacob, the Ark of the Covenant, the closed Eastern Gate of Ezekiel, the unhewn Mountain of Daniel, the Tabernacle, the Cloud, the Temple. The Theotokia does not invent these titles. It finds them in the text. It shows that when the Holy Spirit inspired the Law and the Prophets, He was already drawing the portrait of the woman who would carry the Word of God.

Our fathers teach that whoever reaches the Theotokia in the Tasbeha is being received, in a quiet and mysterious way, into the bosom of St. Mary in heaven. This is an honor many strive for. It is not an honor earned by effort. It is an honor given to the one who has been willing to stay awake with her Son.

Living the Praises: The Microcosm of the Spiritual Journey

The Midnight Praises are not a long service appended to the Liturgy. They are a journey, and they are a small, perfect picture of the whole spiritual life. We come out of the slavery of Egypt through the Red Sea of Baptism. We walk through the wilderness of this world with thanksgiving on our lips. We stand in the furnace of our trials with Christ beside us. We are gathered with the saints. We are lifted, for a while, into the heavenly Jerusalem, where the angels are already at work. And through it all the theme is one theme: watchfulness.

The Church invites us to participate in this life of praise — not as hearers, not as spectators, but as living sacrifices, consciously presenting our bodies, our time, and our sleep to the Lord. The Midnight Praises are not only something we attend. They are something we become. As we learn to watch, to give thanks, to trust Christ in the fire, to keep the Mother of God in our hearts, and to sing with the angels, we are being made into the kind of souls who are ready for the banquet. And the banquet is already near. The Divine Liturgy is about to begin.



Review Questions

1. True or false? We praise with four hos, sung consecutively with no interruptions. (A:

False)

2. Who or what is the first hos dedicated to? (A: The hymn of victory.)
3. Are we just praising God when we praise? (A: No, the heavenly as well.)
4. What is the theme throughout each prayer? (A: Watchfulness.)
5. Who or what was the second hos dedicated to? (A: Giving thanks.)
6. Who or what was the third hos dedicated to? (A: Praising the three holy youths.)
7. What is our goal when praising? (A: To act as a living sacrifice.)
8. Who is tenen dedicated for? (A: The three youths, once again.)
9. True or false? Psalms are a major component of praise. (A: True)
10. What does the word “watos” mean? (A: It means bush.)



Books & References

Scripture:

- Psalm 148:2; Psalm 150; Psalm 141:2; Psalm 36:9; Psalm 138:1 — the praise of angels and the Church.
- Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:5; Hebrews 13:15 — the living sacrifice and the sacrifice of praise.
- Acts 2:46–47 — the praising Church of the Apostles.
- Exodus 15; Revelation 15:3 — the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (First Hos).
- Psalm 135 — Second Hos, the hymn of thanksgiving.
- Daniel 3; the Song of the Three Holy Youth — Third Hos.
- Psalms 148, 149, 150 — Fourth Hos.

Further Reading:

All Scripture quoted from the New King James Version.



Powerpoint Presentations

 TRAD101.1 - Traditions in the Orthodox Church.pptx

 TRAD101.2 - Baptism.pptx

 TRAD101.3 - Myron.pptx

 TRAD101.4 - Spirituality of the Raising of Incense.pptx

 TRAD102.1 - The Divine Liturgy 1 - Overview and Offertory.pptx

 TRAD102.2 - The Divine Liturgy 2 - Liturgy of the Word.pptx .

 TRAD103.3 - The Divine Liturgy 3 - Liturgy of the Faithful.pptx

 TRAD301.1 - Feast of the Cross.pptx

 TRAD301.2 - Midnight Praises.pptx