

Rites & Traditions



Module Type

Rituals and Traditions

LESSON LIST

Rituals and Traditions	2
TRAD101 - Transformative Traditions	3
Traditions	3
Baptism	10
Myron	18
Spirituality of Raising of Incense	25
TRAD102 - Liturgy	32
Divine Liturgy I: Overview & Offertory	32
Divine Liturgy II: Liturgy of the Word	41
Divine Liturgy III: Liturgy of the Faithful	49
TRAD301 - Feasts and Services	57
Feast of the Cross	57
Midnight Praises	65
Powerpoint Presentations	73

Traditions

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Defining Tradition

No servant enters the Orthodox Church and stays within her very long before meeting a question that will, if we let it, shape his whole ministry: What is Tradition, and why does the Church keep speaking of it with such tenderness and such seriousness at once? For some who have come to us from other Christian places, the very word itself feels suspect. For some who have grown up inside the Church, the word has become so familiar that it has quietly lost its weight. We begin with what the Scriptures themselves mean by Tradition, we watch how the Apostles handed on what they had received, we learn to distinguish the Tradition of the Lord from the traditions of men, and we come at last to the vision the Fathers have always held: one living Tradition, with Scripture in its heart, passed from one generation to the next as the living life of the Church. We are not trying to defeat an argument here. We are trying to stand, as servants, inside the house in which we have been asked to teach, and to learn the shape of its walls.

What “Tradition” Means in the Scriptures

The English word tradition is heard today as something old, inherited, perhaps a little tired — a custom one keeps because it has always been kept. The word the Scriptures use is less tired and more living. It is *paradosis*, from the verb *paradidomi*: to hand on, to deliver over. It is the word St. Paul uses when he writes to the Corinthians, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:3). It is the word a runner uses when the baton is passed from one hand to another: something placed into our hand on purpose, entrusted to us, meant to be carried to the next runner without being dropped.

Tradition in the Scriptures, then, is not a dusty inheritance. It is an active handing-on. Something alive is being placed into our hands — not simply information, but a whole way of life, a whole experience of the God who has revealed Himself to us. The Latin rendering of this Greek word is *traditio*, from which our English word comes; and even the Merriam-Webster dictionary preserves a fragment of the original sense, defining tradition as “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.”

The Fathers sharpen this definition and give it its full weight. Tradition is the handing-on not only of teachings but of the living out of those teachings:

- the worship,
- the sacramental life,

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- the shape of prayer,
 - the feasts and fasts,
 - the lives of the saints,
 - the reading of Scripture in the Church.

It is the embodiment of God's revelation through the lives of His people. It is, as one writer has put it, “the living out of the revelation of God by His people.” A servant who carries Tradition, therefore, is not carrying a museum. He is carrying a life.

“Concerning the teachings of the Church, whether publicly proclaimed or reserved to members of the household of faith, we have received some from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly through apostolic tradition. Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source — no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church.” — St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27

The Tradition We Have Received — and How

When we open the New Testament and look carefully, we find that the Apostles themselves speak of Tradition as something with weight and authority. St. Paul does not hide it or apologize for it; he commends it. To the Thessalonians he writes, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The Apostle carefully names two channels by which the teaching has come to them

- by word, which is the oral handing-on, and
- by epistle, which is what we now call Scripture

and he places both under one command: stand fast and hold.

He repeats the same note in the next chapter:

“We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

And to the Corinthians he writes with evident warmth,

“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2).

A tradition handed on by an Apostle under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not a human invention to be outgrown; it is, in the Apostle's own words, something to be kept.

How much, then, has been handed to us in this way? Our Lord, Jesus Christ, ministered publicly for approximately three years. It has been pointed out that if every event recorded in the four Gospels were laid end to end, the written record would cover perhaps eighteen days of those three years. St. John himself closes his Gospel with the admission that “there are also many other things that Jesus

did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). And after His Resurrection, the Lord remained with His disciples for forty days, “speaking of things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3) — forty days whose content is almost entirely absent from the written Scriptures. Many times we read in the Holy Gospels about our Lord Jesus Christ teaching the people in the synagogues, (Matthew 9:35; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:15; 13:22; 19:47,) but the Holy Bible did not document any of these blessed teachings. Where did all these Divine teachings go? They did not vanish. They were handed on! Through the Liturgy, the sacramental life, the prayer of the Church, the discipline of the Apostles and it is still in our hands.

This is why St. John writes to his readers that there is much he would rather speak “face to face” than with “pen and ink” (2 John 12; 3 John 13–14). This is why St. Paul instructs Timothy: “The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). Scripture itself bears witness to the existence and authority of Holy Tradition — not as a rival to the written Word, but as its living context, the air in which the written Word was first read and is still to be read.

Traditions of Men and the Tradition of the Lord

Because the word “tradition” can name more than one thing, the Lord Himself gives us a discipline for distinguishing. In the fifteenth chapter of St. Matthew, the Pharisees come to Him and ask, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” The Lord answers them not with a defense but with a correction: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:2–3). In the parallel passage in St. Mark, He names the error plainly: “Laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men — the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do” (Mark 7:8).

The Apostle Paul echoes the warning in the letter to the Colossians: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). There are traditions, and there are traditions. A tradition that would lay aside the commandment of God in order to maintain a human preference is a tradition of men, and the Lord rebukes it. A tradition handed down “from the Lord” through the Apostles and kept in the Church by the Holy Spirit is the Tradition of Christ, and we are to hold fast to it.

This discipline is not given to make us suspicious of everything we have received; it is given to help us know why we have received what we have received. The servant learns to ask of any usage in the Church: is this from the Lord, through the Apostles, in the life of the Church? Or is this a habit of our own time, a preference of our own culture, attached to the Gospel but not part of it? A shepherd who cannot tell the two apart will either cling to what must be let go or let go of what must be kept. Either one is a wound to the flock.

Scripture Itself Bears Witness to Holy Tradition

It is worth noticing how often the Scriptures themselves reach outside themselves and acknowledge what has been handed down orally. In the Old Testament the tradition of sacrifice is already in place by the fourth chapter of Genesis, when Abel brings “the firstborn of his flock and of their fat” (Genesis 4:4) — no command to sacrifice has yet been recorded, yet the practice is already known. The priesthood and the tithe are handed on to us through the figure of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18–20) and through the vow of Jacob (Genesis 28:22), centuries before the Mosaic law will codify them. Circumcision is handed to Abraham (Genesis 17:9–14) as an oral tradition that will mark a whole people. Joseph knows adultery to be wickedness (Genesis 39:7–10) long before any written law forbids it. The people of Israel know the Sabbath (Exodus 16:27–28) before Sinai.

The New Testament acknowledges the same reality. The epistle of Jude preserves for us the dispute of the Archangel Michael with the devil over the body of Moses, an account found nowhere in the canonical Old Testament but “handed down” in the memory of Israel and accepted, under the Spirit, by the Apostle: “Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’” (Jude 1:9). Jude likewise preserves the prophecy of Enoch: “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all” (Jude 1:14–15). The book of Revelation preserves the tradition of Balaam's counsel to Balak — a detail not present in the Old Testament narrative of Numbers 22–25 in the exact form the Revelation reports it — as evidence of a known, received account within the people of God (Revelation 2:14).

The Scriptures, in other words, presuppose a larger living memory of the people of God within which they themselves were written and are rightly read. The Bible does not sit upon a table in the desert; it sits in the lap of the Church.

The Total Rejection of Holy Tradition

For radical theologians of the sixteenth century, (the Anabaptists,) every individual had the right to interpret Scripture as he or she pleased, subject to guidance of the Holy Spirit. The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the Church. Thus the radicals rejected the practice of infant baptism as non-Scriptural. Similarly, doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ, were rejected as resting upon inadequate Holy Scriptural foundations. The radicals had no place whatsoever for Holy Tradition.

Sebastian Franck wrote in 1503: “foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist.” (Alister E. McGrath, ‘Christian theology: an introduction’. Blackwell Publishers)

The Dual-Source Theory of Holy Tradition

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a different understanding of Holy Tradition from that noted above developed. “Tradition” was understood to be a separate and distinct source of revelation, in addition to Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture, it was argued, was silent on a number of points – but God had providentially arranged for a second source of revelation to supplement this deficiency: a stream

of unwritten Holy Tradition, going back to the Apostles themselves. This Holy Tradition was passed from one generation to another within the Church. This is a dual-source theory of theology: theology is based on two distinct sources, Holy Scripture and unwritten Holy Tradition. A belief, which is not to be found in Holy Scripture, may thus, on the basis of this dual-source theory, be justified by an appeal to an unwritten Holy Tradition.

This position was defended strongly by the Council of Trent, which was charged with defending the Roman Catholic position against the threat posed by the Reformation. Trent ruled that Holy Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation; Holy Tradition was a vital supplement, which Protestants irresponsibly denied. “All saving truths and rules of conduct ... are contained in the written books and in unwritten traditions, received from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the apostles themselves.” Interestingly, however, the Second Vatican Council, (1962-65,) seems to move away from this approach, in favor of the “traditional interpretation of Holy Scripture” approach. (Alister E. McGrath, ‘Christian Theology: an introduction. Blackwell Publishers)

One Living Tradition: Scripture in the Heart of the Church

The Orthodox Church has never held either of the two extreme positions that have marked the history of Western thought. She has not held that Scripture stands alone in total rejection of Holy Tradition, where scripture be interpreted by any individual by the light of his own judgment; nor has she held that the Dual Source Theory of Holy Tradition which stands beside Scripture as a separate source of revelation, capable of introducing teachings for which the Scriptures do not vouch. Her vision has always been older and wider than either.

The vision of the Fathers is that of one living Tradition, within which the Scriptures have their home. Scripture is at the heart of this Tradition; but around Scripture, breathing the same Spirit, are the Divine Liturgy in which the Scriptures are first read, the Creed in which their great confession is summarized, the sacramental life in which their promises are met, the feasts and fasts by which their seasons are kept, the Canons by which their discipline is maintained, the lives of the saints in which their word becomes flesh, and the writings of the Fathers by which each generation is helped to read them well. Remove the Scriptures, and Tradition loses its heart. Remove the Tradition, and the Scriptures are torn out of the only context in which they were ever meant to be read.

“For the Orthodox Christian, there is one Tradition, the Tradition of the Church, incorporating the Scriptures and the teaching of the Fathers. This is the preaching of the truth handed down by the Church in the whole world to Her children.” — attributed to St. Irenaeus of Lyons

“Let us look at the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the catholic Church from the very beginning, which the Logos gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved. Upon this the Church is founded.” — St. Athanasius the Great, Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit

Pope Shenouda III gathered the same teaching for his own generation of Coptic servants: “New issues

arise in each generation that require the opinion of the Church so that people do not get confused. The Church, therefore, gives the opinion of religion on these matters through her authority of teaching and legislation by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through successive generations the Church teaching in a certain generation turns into Tradition inherited by the following generations.” Tradition, in this sense, is not static. It is not a fossil to be dusted. It is the ongoing life of a living Body that breathes the same Spirit who spoke the Scriptures and who still speaks through the councils and Fathers of His Church.

Living Inside the Tradition

What does it mean, then, for us — servants standing in our own generation — to live inside the Tradition of the Church? It means, first, that we do not stand alone. We are not the first to read these Scriptures, to sing these hymns, to bow before this altar. A great cloud of witnesses has stood where we now stand, and they have left us their reading, their prayer, their lives. We are free to drink from this well. Humility opens it; pride closes it again.

It means, second, that the Tradition is to be lived and not merely discussed. The Fathers did not consider themselves to have understood Tradition because they could argue for it; they considered themselves to have understood Tradition because they were shaped by it. A servant will know the Tradition of the Church chiefly by standing often in the Divine Liturgy, by praying the Agpeya, by keeping the fasts with his parish, by reading the Scriptures in the order the Church reads them, by sitting at the feet of the Fathers in their writings, by confessing honestly, by communing frequently, and by letting all of this slowly reshape the interior of his life. Argument is not the first way the Tradition is learned. Worship is.

It means, third, that we serve with great tenderness when we meet brothers and sisters for whom “tradition” is a difficult word. Many of them have known only the distorted versions of it and have understandably recoiled. Our task, as servants, is not to win an argument but to open a door. We do that best not by quoting paragraphs at anyone, but by letting them meet the Tradition where it actually lives — in the Liturgy, in the silence of the Eucharistic altar, in the patience of the fasting Church, in the face of a father who prays.

And it means, finally, that we carry a great treasure with a great seriousness. The baton has been placed in our hand. It was placed in St. Paul's hand; he placed it in Timothy's; Timothy placed it in others who were “able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). We stand now in that long line. May we run our leg of the race faithfully, and may we hand on, undropped, what we have received — that the generation of our own children may receive it, and the generation after them, until the Lord comes.



Review Questions

1. True or false? The transition of man comes before that of God. (A: False)
2. Should the Traditions only be taken from Scripture? (A: No, they are also passed

down by the Apostles.)

3. True or false? We believe in the dual source theory of Holy Tradition. (A: True)
4. What did the Council of Trent believe? (A: Trent ruled that Holy Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation.)
5. Where does “Tradition” come from? (A: The word ‘Tradition’ comes from the Latin ‘Traditio.’)



Books & References

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:3 • 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6 • 2 Timothy 2:2 • Matthew 15:2–3 • Mark 7:8 • Colossians 2:8 • Jude 1:9, 14–15 • Revelation 2:14 • Genesis 4:4; 14:18–20; 17:9–14; 28:22; 39:7–10 • Exodus 16:27–28 • John 21:25 • 2 John 12 • 3 John 13–14 • Acts 1:3

Further Reading:

St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, chapter 27.

- St. Athanasius the Great, Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit.
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III.
- Pope Shenouda III, Comparative Theology.
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Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Baptism

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The First Sacrament

Of the seven sacraments the Church has received from her Lord, the first is Baptism. It is the door of the Church. Through it, we are born again; through it, we enter the household of God; through it, we are given the right to approach the other sacraments and, above all, to stand at the altar of the Eucharist. Every Christian life in the Orthodox Church begins here, at the edge of a baptismal font that is, in the eye of faith, nothing less than the Red Sea, the Jordan, and the open tomb of the risen Lord all at once.

We will begin with the Lord's own institution of the sacrament, move to the question of how baptism actually saves us, watch the Old Testament prepare the waters in six great types, listen to the Scriptures distinguish Christian baptism from the baptism of St. John, ask what it is that makes baptismal water different from ordinary water, receive the form of the sacrament from the Greek word for “baptism” itself, answer honestly the common questions about infants, and close with the one confession the Creed itself places in our mouth: “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins.”

A Door Made of Water

Baptism is the holy sacrament by which we are born again. The font is a womb, the water is both tomb and birthing pool, and the new life that rises from it has the Name of the Holy Trinity written over it. The Church has always defined the sacrament in the simplest terms the Lord Himself gave: an immersion, three times, in water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It is the door through which we enter into the Church — not a building, but the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ — and only the one who has passed through this door has the right to draw near to the altar and partake of the rest of the sacraments.

It is worth pausing on the word “sacrament” for a moment. By it the Church means more than a ritual. She means a visible sign given by the Lord Himself, through which an invisible grace is truly imparted. The water that touches the body is ordinary water; the grace that touches the soul through that water is the grace of the Resurrection. When we speak of the sacraments as the “mysteries” of the Church, we are not being decorative; we mean that the Lord has hidden, in the smallest and most tangible of things — water, oil, bread, wine — the greatest of His gifts. Baptism is the first of these mysteries because it is the one that opens the rest.

And because baptism opens the rest, it is also the sacrament that shapes the servant's whole vision of the Christian life. Every child who is brought to the font is being welcomed into a kingdom that began to bloom long before he drew his first breath; every convert who steps down into the baptismal water

is stepping down into the burial of his old man and into the resurrection of the new. A servant who has understood this will never preside at a baptism casually, and will never teach about it without the trembling of one who knows that he himself is the fruit of the same water.

How Baptism Saves: Dying and Rising with Christ

The Lord instituted this sacrament after His Resurrection, at the very moment His redemption of the world was complete. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18–19). And to the same circle of eleven He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The necessity He Himself had pressed earlier upon Nicodemus in the darkness: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

How does baptism save us? The Scriptures answer with a single, sober word: by death. “Without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22); salvation is made available to us through the redeeming death of Christ upon the Cross, and we who would have a share in that salvation must share in His death and resurrection. “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10). Unless a person undergoes this death, he will not be saved.

And how can we, who live on this side of the Cross, undergo this death? Through baptism. St. Paul speaks plainly: “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3–4). “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection... now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him” (Romans 6:5–8).

The salvation that begins in our burial with Christ continues in us by the same shape. We were buried with Him once in the water; we are now to keep our bodies dead to sin every day, that the newness of His Resurrection may be the air we live in. As long as the old man is kept dead, salvation lives in us; when the lusts of the flesh rise again from the grave the font gave them, we put our own salvation at risk. This is why the Apostle can speak of baptism in the aorist (“you were buried”) and of the Christian life in the continuous (“reckon yourselves dead indeed to sin”, Romans 6:11). The sacrament is given once; the way of life it inaugurates is given every day.

The Old Testament Prepares the Waters

Because the work of God in history is one work, the Old Testament has already made the font ready for the New. The Fathers have never seen baptism as an invention of the last chapter; they have seen it everywhere in the first. Six great types, in particular, the Church has placed in the hand of the servant who is called to teach the sacrament.

The first is at the creation. At the very opening of Genesis, where “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Both a symbol and a prophecy, this verse fixes in our imagination the pattern of every Christian baptism that will follow: water beneath, Spirit above, and a new creation rising where the two meet.

The second is the ark of Noah. St. Peter places the parallel in our hand himself: “The divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us — baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20–21). Eight souls were saved through water, and the Church has never failed to notice that the Lord's Resurrection Himself fell on “the first day of the week” (John 20:1) — the eighth day, the day that has no end, the day of the new creation. Baptism is our ark; the new creation is her cargo.

The third is circumcision. “You were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11–12). Circumcision was the seal of the Old Covenant; baptism is the seal of the New. God had spoken of the uncircumcised child, “That person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Genesis 17:14) — and the Lord has spoken of the unbaptized, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The covenant has deepened; the seriousness has not lifted.

The fourth is the crossing of the Red Sea. “All our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). The Fathers have seen here the whole theology of baptism in miniature: the sea is the baptismal water, which draws its saving power from the Blood of the Lord (and which bears, providentially, the name “Red”); the cloud is the Holy Spirit, who broods over those waters; and Pharaoh, the prince of the old tyranny, is the enemy who is drowned once for all by the Cross of Christ in those same waters.

The fifth is the laver of the priests. Aaron and his sons could not enter the tabernacle to minister until they had been washed with water (Exodus 29:4); a great basin of bronze stood between the tent of meeting and the altar (Exodus 30:18), and every priestly step passed through it. The washing of the priests prefigures the washing of the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), of which every baptized Christian is a member.

The sixth is gathered from the prophets and historians of Israel. The sacrifice of Elijah was accepted only after water had been poured upon it three times (1 Kings 18:34). Elijah himself did not ascend into heaven until he had crossed the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8). The Israelites did not enter the Promised Land until they had passed through those same waters (Joshua 3). And before the throne of God in the Apocalypse there is “a sea of glass, like crystal” (Revelation 4:6). The pattern is the Spirit's own: there is a water we must pass through to reach the company of God. That water, in our time, is the font.

The Baptism of St. John

Before we take up the question of what gives baptismal water its efficacy, it is worth clearing a small but important corner. The New Testament distinguishes very carefully between the baptism of St. John and the baptism that the Risen Lord has instituted. St. John himself drew the line: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). The baptism of St. John, and even the baptism that the disciples administered during the Lord's earthly ministry (John 4:2), was preparatory: it was a baptism of repentance, but the Cross had not yet been climbed, the gift of the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out (John 7:37–39), and the power that unites us to the death and Resurrection of the Lord was not yet available in the water.

Once Pentecost has come, the distinction is drawn with unmistakable clarity. To the Ephesian disciples St. Paul says, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” — and when they answer, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit,” he inquires further, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answer, “Into John's baptism.” He explains that John's baptism pointed ahead to the Christ who has now come, and then baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1–5). Even at Pentecost itself, St. Peter does not exempt those who had already received St. John's baptism: “Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). There is no such thing as a Christian life that has not passed through the Christian font.

Water and the Spirit: the Efficacy of the Sacrament

The honest question rises quickly: what does mere water do when a person is immersed in it? And the answer of the Church is that mere water does nothing. Baptismal water is not mere water. It is water united, by the epiclesis of the Church, with the power of the Holy Spirit; and in that union it becomes a true channel of regeneration and cleansing.

Two stories from the Scriptures illustrate the pattern. Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, was a leper. The prophet Elisha sent him to wash seven times in the Jordan, and when at last he obeyed in humility, his flesh came back to him “like the flesh of a little child” (2 Kings 5:14). The waters of the Jordan were no more healing than any other water; what healed him was the Word of the Lord working through the waters. The same pattern repeats with the man born blind: the Lord sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he comes back seeing (John 9:11). Water plus the Word of the Lord. Water plus the Spirit of the Lord.

This is precisely the formula the Lord gave Nicodemus: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5–6). And the Apostle John, in his first epistle, closes the circle: “There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one” (1 John 5:7–8). Water alone is only water. Water with the Spirit and the Blood is the mystery of our salvation.

Three Immersions in One Name

The Greek verb the Church received from the Apostles is baptizo. It does not mean “to sprinkle” or “to pour.” It means, literally, to immerse, to dip under, to submerge. From the very word itself the form of the sacrament is already given: the Orthodox Church baptizes by triple immersion — three times, one for each Person of the Holy Trinity — “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The New Testament itself confirms the form. When St. Philip baptized the eunuch, “both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water...” (Acts 8:38–39). Had baptism been a sprinkling, Philip could have carried water from the stream to the chariot. St. Paul's own language is even clearer: “We were buried with Him through baptism” (Romans 6:4); “buried with Him in baptism” (Colossians 2:12). One is not buried by having a spoonful of earth sprinkled on one's forehead; one is buried by being placed under the earth. The same holds for the water. Baptism is called a “washing” (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:18–21; Ephesians 5:26), and a garment cannot be washed by the flicking of a few drops upon its surface; a garment is washed by being immersed in water.

Because baptism is necessary to salvation and must not be delayed when life is in danger, the Church does permit, in very limited circumstances, baptism by sprinkling. A newborn infant in an incubator with a fatal condition cannot be immersed; in such a case the Church does not refuse the gift of the sacrament because the ideal form is impossible. In the absence of a priest, any Orthodox Christian — male or female — may, in an emergency, baptize by anointing the infant with water three times with the Trinitarian formula, that the child may not die unsealed. If the child lives, the baptism is not repeated; the child is afterward anointed with the Holy Myron to complete the initiation. The emergency case does not set aside the rule; it is, as St. Gregory the Theologian says, the exception the Father's mercy makes for His children in distress.

Why We Baptize Our Children

No question is more often put to a Coptic servant than this one. Our Lord said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5) — and the pronoun is without qualification. Infants are not exempt. They are born, as we all are, into a nature bent by the first Adam's fall; and the gift of baptism is the door by which the second Adam welcomes them into His own Kingdom.

Scripture itself gives us four quiet reasons to baptize our children. The first is the analogy of circumcision. In the Old Covenant, God commanded that the male child be brought into the covenant on the eighth day, long before he could answer for himself; St. Paul has already taught us that baptism is the new circumcision, “the circumcision made without hands” (Colossians 2:11–13). If the Father welcomed the children of Israel into the old covenant at eight days old, it is strange reasoning that would now forbid the children of the Church from the new.

The second is the crossing of the Red Sea, which St. Paul has taught us to read as the type of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). There is no reason to suppose the Israelite infants were left on the near shore. They crossed with their fathers and mothers, and so the children of the New Israel cross with theirs.

The third is the promise of Pentecost. “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children” (Acts 2:38–39). St. Peter, on the very first Christian day, opens the door of the sacrament to children. The fourth is the practice of the Apostles themselves, who are recorded baptizing whole households — the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14–15), the household of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). It would be remarkable, given the sense of “household” in the ancient world, if no child had been among them.

And behind all four reasons stands the face of the Lord Himself. “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14); “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). Nowhere in Scripture are we forbidden to baptize a child. Everywhere, we are invited to bring them to Him.

“One Baptism for the Remission of Sins”

Each week in the Creed we confess, with the whole Church of all ages, “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins.” The confession is weighty in both its parts. The baptism is one, and it is not repeated — because birth is not repeated (one is born once, and one is born again once), and because the death of Christ into which we are plunged is not repeated (“He died once for all,” Romans 6:10). “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). The Church who receives us at the font places upon us a seal that is never effaced and that does not need to be renewed.

And the baptism is for the remission of sins. The font is not a decoration on the front of the Christian life; it is the place where our sins are forgiven, where the old Adam is buried, and where the new man is raised with the Risen Lord. This is why a Christian who has fallen after his baptism is not re-baptized; he is absolved, through the sacrament of Confession, into the baptism he has already received. The font gives the life; Confession keeps returning us to the font when we have wandered from what it made of us.

A last word, on a question that touches every pastor's heart: what of the infants who die unbaptized through no fault of their own? The Church does not answer by shrinking the Lord's command; but she does not answer by shrinking His mercy either. The Fathers have taught with great care. St. Gregory the Theologian speaks for many of them when he says of those who are unsealed by the sacrament “on account of infancy, or some perfectly involuntary circumstance,” that they “will be neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, as unsealed and yet not wicked, but persons who have suffered rather than done wrong.” Our duty is to bring our children to the font without delay, as the Church has always done. Where the sacrament has been truly impossible, we place the child into the hands of the One whose mercy is full of justice and whose justice is full of mercy — and we trust Him.

May the Lord who was Himself baptized in the Jordan, to sanctify the nature of the waters that every one of us would pass through, accept our own baptism and the baptism of every child we bring to His Church. May He keep the grave that was opened for us in the font closed always against the return of

the old man. And may the Resurrection He gave us in that water be the air our souls breathe every day until He comes.



Review Questions

1. What are the three elements necessary for baptism? (Answer: faith, spirit, and water)
2. What are some symbols of Baptism in the Old Testament? (A: Crossing the red sea, Elijah crossing the waters of the jordan river, circumcision.)
3. We obtain salvation through death and our bodies must always remain dead in relation to worldly lusts. True or false? (A: True)
4. Unless a person undergoes this death, he/she will not be saved! How then can we undergo this death and share in the death of Christ? (A: Through Baptism)
5. When did Christ institute the sacrament of baptism? (A: After his resurrection)
6. Baptism is the Holy Sacrament through which we are born again by being sprinkled by water three times in the name of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. True or false? (A: False, we are immersed by water)
7. Why is the sacrament of Baptism the first among the seven holy sacraments?
(A: Because it is the door through which the individual enters the Church (as a congregation) and is given the right to partake of the rest of the Sacraments.)



Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 28:18–19; 3:11; 19:14; 18:10 • Mark 16:16 • John 3:3, 5–6; 7:37–39; 20:1 • Acts 2:38–39; 8:38–39; 16:14–15, 33; 19:1–5; 22:16 • Romans 6:3–11 • 1 Corinthians 1:16; 5:7; 10:1–2; 15:50 • Ephesians 4:5; 5:26 • Philippians 3:10 • Colossians 2:11–13 • Titus 3:5 • Hebrews 9:22 • 1 Peter 2:9; 3:18–21 • 1 John 5:7–8 • Revelation 4:6 • Genesis 1:2; 17:14 • Exodus 29:4; 30:18 • Joshua 3 • 1 Kings 18:34 • 2 Kings 2:8; 5:14

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Seven Sacraments of the Church.
- H.G. Bishop Mettaous, The Sacrament of Baptism.
- St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 40: On Holy Baptism.
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures (especially Lectures III, XIX–XX).
- St. John Chrysostom, Baptismal Instructions.
- The Didache, chapter 7.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Myron

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Back to Back Sacrament

After the water of the font comes the oil of the seal. The second sacrament the Church has received from her Lord is Chrismation — the anointing of the newly baptized with the Holy Myron — and the oil by which this mystery is conveyed is the most sanctified substance the Coptic Orthodox Church possesses. It is not merely blessed oil; it is, as St. Cyril of Jerusalem teaches, “no longer ordinary oil after the epiclesis of the Spirit, but the charism of Christ.” It has come down to us, the Fathers tell us, from a jar first compounded in the upper room of St. Mark the Evangelist, where the Apostles mixed pure olive oil with the very spices that had been placed upon the Body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the tomb. Every new batch has been added to what remained of the old. Every baptized child among us today has been sealed with a few precious drops that can be traced, through an unbroken mixing, back to the linen cloth that was folded in Joseph of Arimathea's garden. This lesson walks the whole length of the tradition — the five oils of the Church in their ascending order of sanctification, the Old and New Testament witnesses to the sealing, the teaching of the Fathers, the rite of making, and the specific uses to which the Holy Myron is put in the life of the Church.

The Seal That Is Placed Upon Us

When a child is lifted from the baptismal font, the work of the sacrament is not yet complete. The Church has received from her Lord a second gift, intimately joined to the first, by which the baptized is sealed with the Holy Spirit and constituted a living member of the Body of Christ. This gift is conveyed by a single substance of extraordinary sanctity: the Holy Myron, the chrism. To anoint a Christian with the Holy Myron is to extend to him, in our own generation, the laying-on of hands that passed through the Apostles and that is carried in our own time by the Pope and the successors of the Apostles.

The word “chrism” comes from the same Greek root as the name Christos, the Anointed One. When St. Paul writes, “He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Corinthians 1:21–22), he is pointing exactly at the mystery we receive in the Holy Myron. The oil is the visible sign; the Spirit is the gift it conveys; and the gift is nothing less than Christ Himself extending His own anointing to the one just born again in the font.

The Holy Myron is therefore not a decoration of the sacrament of Baptism; it is the sacrament of the Spirit's seal. St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and St. Ambrose all speak of it with a weight that the servant must learn to carry. The oil that is touched to the forehead and the hands and the feet of a newly baptized child is the oil that makes him Christ's own, claimed and marked forever for the

Day of Redemption (Ephesians 4:30).

The Five Oils of the Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church knows and uses five distinct sacred oils, each prepared, prayed over, and reserved for specific purposes. They rise, one above the next, in the degree of their sanctification. A servant who can distinguish them can teach his flock when each oil is given, when it is received, and what it is for.

The first is the Oil of the Lamp, called in our own tradition the Qandeel. This is the oil that burns continually before the icons of the saints in our churches. Because it carries the soft light of the sanctuary and has been gathered up into the prayers of many, it is considered a sacramental. It may be used to anoint anyone — Christian or not — as a sign of blessing, of protection, of the Church's prayer for one who has come near to her lamps.

The second is the Oil of a Service. This is an olive oil over which a portion of the Holy Scriptures has been read in the service of the Church — as, for example, on the apocalyptic evening when the book of Revelation is read in its entirety. Its sanctification rests on St. Paul's own teaching: "Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5). Unlike the Qandeel, this oil is given for anointing only to the faithful, who have been sealed already into the Body.

The third is the Oil of the Unction of the Sick. This oil is not simply blessed; it is the matter of a full sacrament. Through it the Holy Spirit works for the healing of the sick, both in the body and in the soul, alongside the gift of the forgiveness of sins. St. James has placed the sacrament into our hand plainly: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14–15). The Oil of the Unction is, like every sacrament, a place where the Lord Himself comes to meet His child at the exact point of need.

The fourth is the Oil of the Ghalilaon, a name that has been understood to mean the "oil of rejoicing" or the "oil of the catechumens." It is compounded together with the Holy Myron, from the same spices, in the same rite, and is reserved for two closely related purposes: it anoints the catechumen at the time of baptism, and a portion of it is added to the baptismal water itself — after the Scripture readings, the three long prayers, and the Creed, just before the sanctification of the water. It is the oil that meets us on the very edge of the font.

The fifth, the highest, and the oil of which this lesson properly speaks, is the Holy Myron. It is the most sanctified oil in the Church; it is the oil of the chrismation that seals every baptized Christian; and it is the oil by which the Church herself, her altar, her liturgical vessels, her icons, and her baptismal tank are consecrated. It is the oil in which the apostolic tradition itself has been made visible to our senses.

The Old Testament Anointing Oil

When God gave Moses the pattern of the worship of Israel at the foot of Sinai, He did not leave the

matter of anointing to human invention. He specified the very recipe: “Moreover the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Also take for yourself quality spices — five hundred shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much sweet-smelling cinnamon (two hundred and fifty shekels), two hundred and fifty shekels of sweet-smelling cane, five hundred shekels of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make from these a holy anointing oil, an ointment compounded according to the art of the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil’” (Exodus 30:22–25).

The oil Moses compounded was reserved for sacred use. “You shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on man's flesh; nor shall you make any other like it, according to its composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on an outsider, shall be cut off from his people’” (Exodus 30:31–33). This was an oil for the consecration of the priests and of the holy vessels of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:26–30; Leviticus 8:10–12; Numbers 7:1); it is implied that with it, or with oil of like sanctity, the prophets (1 Kings 19) and the kings of Israel were anointed (1 Samuel 9; 1 Samuel 16; 2 Samuel 2, 5; 1 Kings 1; 2 Kings 9).

What was most striking about this oil, to the Old Testament reader, was its restriction. It was not for the body of any ordinary Israelite; it was kept for priest, prophet, king, and the vessels of the house of God. That restriction was not abolished in the New Covenant — it was universalized. Under Christ, the priesthood is stretched out to include every baptized Christian; the house of God is stretched out to include every believer, whose body has become “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19). And so the oil itself, no longer hidden behind the veil, is laid upon every single child who comes through the waters of the font.

The New Testament Witness: Anointed, Sealed, Set Apart

The word “chrism” itself is not the only witness the New Testament gives to the anointing of the faithful. The verb the Apostle loves most is to seal. “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13–14). “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). A seal in the ancient world was a mark of ownership pressed into hot wax; it was not easily effaced. So with the Holy Spirit upon us through the Holy Myron: we have been marked as belonging to Another.

St. John, in his first epistle, speaks of the same reality with the word *chrisma* itself: “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things” (1 John 2:20); “The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you... and as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things... just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (1 John 2:27). The anointing is not a one-time event that fades from memory; it abides. The gift the Church gives the newly baptized is a gift that does not leave him for the rest of his life.

And because the anointed Christian has become, in his very body, a temple of the living God, the Apostle's words acquire a startling concreteness. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and

that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The Holy Myron places the tabernacle inside us; the Christian life is the long learning to live as its priests.

The Fathers and the Ancient Tradition

The Holy Myron is not named explicitly in the New Testament by that word. But the Fathers of the Church — from the second century onward, with one voice — speak of it, and they speak of it as a tradition received from the Apostles themselves.

“Anointing with oil consecrated according to ancient custom.” — St. Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition

“We are baptized with visible water and visible chrism according to the tradition of the Church.” — Origen, Commentary on Romans V.8

“This oil is not just any oil after the epiclesis of the Spirit; it becomes the charism of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit through the presence of the deity.” — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis III

To these three witnesses the Church joins the testimony of St. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, St. Ambrose of Milan, and many of the Alexandrian Fathers. All of them take the Holy Myron for granted as part of the rite of Christian initiation, and all of them describe it with language very near to our own.

The earliest detailed account of the history of the Holy Myron that has come down to us is the work of a fourteenth-century Coptic priest and scholar, Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar, in his *Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah* — the *Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service*. According to his account, the holy Apostles took from the spices that had been used to anoint the body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, at His burial (cf. John 19:38–40), added pure olive oil to them, and prayed over the mixture in Upper Zion — the first Christian church, which was in the house of St. Mark the Evangelist. The Apostles divided this holy oil among themselves, so that wherever they preached, those who believed and were baptized might be anointed with it as a seal; and they commanded that in every subsequent making, the old Myron should be added to the new, that the original Myron might never be lost.

The making continued in sufficient quantities for the life of the Church until the days of Pope Athanasius the Apostolic of Alexandria. In a period of shortage, Pope Athanasius wrote to the other Patriarchs, and together they formalized the rite — writing down the prayers, standardizing the procedure, and re-making the Holy Myron in the quantities the ever-growing Church required. To this day, every Coptic Orthodox Christian sealed with the Myron is sealed with an oil that contains, in trace, a portion of that original batch.

The Rite by which the Holy Myron Is Made

The making of the Holy Myron is a rite of the whole Church, reserved to the Patriarch and concelebrated by the bishops. It is prepared so that the oil does not spoil — a preservation likely rooted in ancient Egyptian expertise that Moses himself learned and used (Exodus 30).

Twenty to thirty different spices, including balsam, are mixed into pure olive oil and cooked over low heat with continuous stirring. The cooking is typically repeated two to four times, so that the chemistry of the spices gives the oil its proper consistency and character. All through the cooking, prayers are recited — the 150 Psalms, if the making falls in the last week of Great Lent, or the prayers of Pascha, if the making falls in Holy Week itself.

Once the cooking is complete, the oil is clarified of the spices. Over that clarified oil the prayers of sanctification are offered, invoking the Holy Spirit upon it, that it may become the Chrism of Christ and the seal of the Spirit upon those who will be anointed with it. The remaining spices, now saturated with the prayer of the whole Church, are not discarded. Over them a fresh batch of pure olive oil is cooked and prayed over in its own rite; this is the Ghalilaon, the oil of the catechumens, which will be poured into the baptismal waters and anointed upon those who will enter them.

Both oils are kept in a place of honor beneath the altar until after the Feast of the Resurrection. On the Monday after the Feast — the Monday of the Bright Week, when the Church is still living inside the open tomb — the previous batch of Myron and Ghalilaon is mixed with the new. In this way a portion of the spices that were laid upon the Body of our Lord in the tomb is kept continuously present in every drop of Myron that will anoint a Christian of our own generation.

Where the Holy Myron Is Placed

The Holy Myron is given sparingly, for specific purposes, and only by those whom the Church has ordained to give it. The servant does not handle it casually; he speaks of it soberly, because it is the most sanctified substance the Church possesses.

Its first use is in the sacrament of Baptism itself. The Holy Myron is added to the water of the font, so that the one who is baptized may truly be born “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Because the Myron contains the spices that had lain on the Body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the tomb, the water into which it has been poured becomes, in a very literal way, the grave of the Lord Himself. The Christian who is plunged into it dies with Him, is buried with Him, and is raised with Him in an actual participation in His death and Resurrection (Romans 6:3–5).

Its second and most visible use is in the sacrament of Chrismation, sometimes called Confirmation. After coming up from the font, the newly baptized is anointed with the Holy Myron in thirty-six separate signings — over the crown of the head, the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, the mouth, the back (twice), the heart (twice), and six times over the main joints of each arm and each leg. In this pattern of anointings, the body that has just been baptized is made, down to its joints, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The whole person is sealed for the Day of Redemption.

Its third use is in the consecration of the sacred places and vessels of the Church. The church building

itself is anointed; the altar, and the altar board upon which the paten and chalice will rest; the paten, the chalice, the spoon, the star that is laid over the paten; the two corporals for the paten and the chalice; the artophorion in which the Eucharist is carried to the sick and the imprisoned; the brusfarin; the icons through which we venerate the Lord and His saints; and the baptismal tank. All of these are set apart from ordinary use by the touch of the Holy Myron. The other furnishings of the church do not require this anointing.

Historically, the Holy Myron has also been used in the ordination of priests and the consecration of bishops; this usage is preserved to the present in the Latin and Armenian Churches, and is remembered in some of our own older practices.

May the Lord who sealed us in our own baptism with the Holy Myron of His Apostles keep that seal unbroken upon us. May He remind us, when we are tempted, that we are not our own, for we were bought at a price and anointed with the very spices of His tomb. And may every servant who touches the Myron — whether as a father at a baptism, or as a deacon assisting at the altar, or simply as a member of the faithful — touch it with the trembling love of one who has been given more than he can measure.



Review Questions

1. Who made note of the earliest accounts of Myron's history? (A: Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar)
2. True or false? Myron is used for more than one sacrament in the Holy Church. (A: True)
3. True or false? An oil that is analogous to the Holy Myron is what God told Moses to make after the exodus out of Egypt. (A: True)
4. What is another name for the 'oil of the lamp?' (A: Qandeel)
5. True or false? The Holy Myron is the oil with the lowest level of sanctification in the church. (A: False)



Books & References

Scripture: Exodus 30:22–33, 26–30 • Leviticus 8:10–12 • Numbers 7:1 • 1 Samuel 9; 16 • 2 Samuel 2; 5 • 1 Kings 1; 19 • 2 Kings 9 • Matthew 28:19 • John 3:5; 19:38–40 • Romans 6:3–5 • 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20 • 2 Corinthians 1:21–22 • Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30 • 1 Timothy 4:4–5 • James 5:14–15 • 1 John 2:20, 27

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Seven Sacraments of the Church.
- Abu I-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis III: On Chrismation.
- St. Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition.
- Origen, Commentary on Romans.
- Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), Encyclopedia of the Early Church.
- <https://suscopts.org/resources/literature/539/the-holy-myron/>

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Spirituality of the Raising of Incense

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

More than Preparation

Long before the Divine Liturgy begins, the Church comes together to raise incense. In the Coptic reckoning, the day itself runs from evening to evening, and so every Christian day opens with the Raising of Incense of Vespers and is gathered up, the next morning, by the Raising of Incense of Matins. These two services are not a warm-up for the Liturgy; they are themselves acts of sacrifice. They are the place where the servant first learns to offer his day back to God as a sweet-smelling aroma before the altar, and where the whole congregation is taught, in the quiet rise of the smoke, to entrust its prayer to the one Mediator who offered Himself once for all. This lesson walks through the Raising of Incense at both Vespers and Matins: we trace the shape of the service, listen to the priest's prayers in their original voice, see how the burnt offering of Israel has been fulfilled in the Cross of Christ and taken up into our own worship, watch the censer become the place where the people's confession is gathered, receive the prayer “Efnoti Nai Nan East” that turns us to every quarter of the compass, and see how all of this prepares us, when the Liturgy begins, to meet the Lord Himself upon the altar.

The Shape of the Service

The Coptic day begins at sunset. Our calendar is older than the watches of the Romans; it echoes the evening-and-morning pattern of the first day of creation: “So the evening and the morning were the first day” (Genesis 1:5). The Raising of Incense of Vespers, therefore, is the first act of our Christian day, and the Raising of Incense of Matins the next morning gathers up the night and presents it back to God at its rising.

Both raisings follow the same deliberate sequence. We begin with the Our Father — placing ourselves first, as our Lord Himself taught, before the Face of the Father. We move to the Prayer of Thanksgiving — because every standing before God begins with gratitude. We say the Prayer of Incense during the verses of the Cymbals of Joy, that short hymn of praise which lifts the heart to the altar. We recite the litanies — the Church's ordered intercession for her life, her mysteries, her sick, her dead. We move into the Procession of Incense during the Doxologies, those psalmic hymns by which we praise the Lord and His saints, each doxology carrying the incense a little further around the sanctuary. We sing the Prayers of Mercy. We rise to hear the Gospel. We offer a few short concluding litanies. And we close with the final blessing.

The sequence is not a scaffold to be tolerated until the moment of interest arrives. Every element is itself a moment of interest. The Our Father drops the servant into the place of a child. The Thanksgiving puts his fear in its right proportion. The Prayer of Incense aligns his little offering with the great offering. The Litanies widen his heart beyond his own parish to the whole Church. The Procession carries the pleading upward as the smoke rises. The Gospel opens the mouth of the Lord Himself above us. The blessing sends us out different from the way we came in. A servant who has learned to pray inside this shape has learned to pray.

The Prayer of Incense — Vespers and Matins

At Vespers, the priest leads the congregation with the words that rise from an older memory of the Song of Songs itself: “O Christ our God, the great, awesome, and true, the only-begotten Son and Logos of God the Father, ‘ointment poured forth is Your holy name’ (Song of Songs 1:3), and in every place incense is offered to Your holy name, and a pure sacrifice.” The deacon then calls the people into the offering: “Pray for our sacrifice, and those who have brought it.” And the priest continues: “We ask You, O our Master, receive our prayers to Yourself. Let our prayers be set forth before You as incense, the lifting up of our hands the evening sacrifice. For You are the true evening sacrifice, who has offered Yourself upon the honored Cross for our sins, according to the will of Your good Father; with whom You are blessed, with the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, who is of one essence with You, now and at all times and unto the age of all ages. Amen.”

At Matins, the priest begins with a different passafe, reaching back through the whole history of sacrifice: “O God, who received to Yourself the offerings of the righteous Abel, the sacrifice of Noah and Abraham, and the incense of Aaron and Zachariah.” The deacon responds with the same call: “Pray for our sacrifice, and those who have brought it.” And the priest concludes: “Receive to Yourself this incense at the hands of us sinners, as a sweet savor of incense unto the remission of our sins, and of the rest of Your people. For blessed and full of glory is Your holy name, O Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and at all times and unto the age of all ages. Amen.”

The two prayers are a pair. At Vespers, we name Christ Himself as the “true evening sacrifice” offered upon the Cross; at Matins, we thread our poor offering into the long thread of every offering the Father has ever received — Abel’s lamb, Noah’s ark-altar, Abraham’s son on the mountain, Aaron’s golden censer, Zachariah’s morning incense in the Holy Place (Luke 1:9). The priest, according to the ancient rite preserved by Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar in the fourteenth century, prayed these prayers aloud, that the whole congregation might pray them with him. There was, in Ibn Kabar’s day, a period in which the Church insisted that the Raising of Incense be prayed daily in every parish, regardless of whether a Liturgy was to follow. The Church’s wisdom here is worth keeping: the servant’s day is held up in offering to God every morning and every evening, whether or not there is anything else to celebrate.

Incense and the Burnt Offering: the Old Testament Root

To understand what the Church is doing when she raises incense, we must return to the worship of Israel. In Numbers chapters 28 and 29, the Lord commanded Moses the whole rhythm of the sacrifice of His people: the burnt offering, the grain offering, and the drink offering, to be presented twice every

day, every morning and every evening; on every Sabbath; at the beginning of every month; and on every great feast of the year — Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement.

The pattern was relentless, because the Father's care for His people was relentless. He did not want them to drift from Him even the span of a morning without being drawn back by offering. The servant who learns the Psalms learns this same pattern: “My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up” (Psalm 5:3); “Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2). Incense in the morning; incense in the evening; the whole day between, held in the hand of the God who does not want His people to wander.

Are the burnt offerings of Israel still mandated? Yes, and no. Yes, because the pattern is the Father's pattern; a daily offering, morning and evening. No, because the substance has been fulfilled. “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart — these, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:16–17). And so the Apostle names the substance: “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). The book of Hebrews draws the line at its sharpest: “Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:11–14).

The burnt offering is Christ Himself. The daily rhythm of incense, which we still keep every morning and every evening, no longer supplies what He has once supplied forever; it unites our own hearts, in thanksgiving and contrition, with that one offering on the Cross. As St. Paul writes, “Walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:2). Poured out, as a drink offering, which during the sacrifices, were poured in their entirety. We are presenting Christ as the ultimate burnt offering, and inside Him, we are presenting ourselves, poured out in our entirety.

The Altar of Incense and the Cross of Christ

In the tabernacle and the temple of Israel, two altars stood. The altar of burnt offering stood in the outer court, where the animal sacrifices were consumed in fire. Farther in, inside the Holy Place, just before the veil of the Holy of Holies, stood the golden altar of incense. Only after the worshipper had brought his sacrifice, and only after the priest had been purified at the bronze laver, did the incense rise before the veil. The smoke of the incense was the sign that the sacrifice had been accepted — the prayer of the forgiven ascending into the presence of the Lord.

The pattern held its shape into the age of the Apocalypse. St. John saw it in heaven: “Another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand” (Revelation 8:3–4). The incense of our Church is joined, in the eye of faith, with the incense of the altar before the

throne. The smoke that rises from our censer passes through the roof of our parish into the vision the beloved disciple saw.

And between our censer and that golden altar is the one event that makes the whole connection possible: the Cross of Christ. The offering of incense in the Church symbolizes, above all else, the offering of our Lord upon the Cross. The fire that consumes the resin was His love; the resin that is consumed was His Body; the sweet smoke that rises is His prayer and ours rising together to the Father. To raise the incense in the Church is to remember the Cross, and to offer our own repentant selves inside it.

The Procession of Incense: Confession Gathered and Offered

During the Procession of Incense, the priest walks the sanctuary with the censer, tracing along the way the sign of the infinity — the horizontal eight — a small and quiet icon of the eternal life into which we are being drawn. The path is never a straight line; it folds back upon itself, because the life he is teaching us to pray into has no beginning and no end.

As he moves, the people are quietly doing what the Old Testament worshipper did when he brought his animal to the altar: they are confessing their sins. In Leviticus the offerer laid his hand upon the head of the sacrifice and confessed his sins there (Leviticus 16:21); in the Raising of Incense, the congregation lays its sins upon the incense, which is itself a symbol of the Lamb. This is why, when the priest returns to the altar, he prays: “O God, who, while on the honored Cross, accepted the confession of the thief, accept also the confession of Your people, and forgive them all their sins, for the sake of Your holy name which is called upon us; according to Your mercy, O Lord, and not according to our sins.” The confession of the thief was accepted by Christ on the Cross; the confession of the people is accepted by the same Christ on the altar.

The priest, in a sense, has gathered the sins of the people into the censer, just as the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He carries them, in the incense, to the altar. There — at the threshold of what is about to become the Divine Liturgy — they are laid upon the Body who bore them first on the Cross.

“He Instituted for Us the Great Mystery”

When the Liturgy itself comes, the incense returns one more time, at the most pivotal moment of the whole celebration: the Consecration, or the Institution Narrative. The priest incenses his own hands three times, and three times he carries the incense in his hands to the holy bread. With each approach he says, “He instituted for us the great mystery of godliness.” On the third round, he also carries the incense above the chalice, and after censuring the chalice he adds, “For He was determined to give Himself up for the life of the world.”

This is not a flourish. The priest's hands, like the censer he carried in the Procession, have gathered the confession of the people; he has held that confession over the bread and wine that are about to become the very Body and Blood of the Lord who carries our sins. The incense, the priest's hands, and the Lord Himself are brought into one gesture of offering. The Apostle's words pass over our

understanding here: “Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Philippians 2:17); “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand” (2 Timothy 4:6).

“He has not said of my sacrifice; but, what is much more, of my being poured out. For the whole of the sacrifice was not offered to God, but the whole of the drink-offering was.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily on 2 Timothy 4

St. John Chrysostom teaches us here a small but important thing. The whole of a sacrifice is not always given to God — a portion of the animal is burned, a portion is shared in the meal of the priests and the offerers. But the whole of the drink offering, poured out upon the sacrifice, goes up in steam and is consumed. To be poured out as a drink offering is to give oneself without remainder, every drop, nothing reserved. This is what the incense of Vespers and Matins, properly understood, is teaching us every single day — to be poured out with Christ, on top of Christ, every evening and every morning until there is nothing left to reserve.

“Efnoti Nai Nan”: Toward the Lord

At a certain moment in the Raising of Incense, the priest turns to face each of the four directions, and the people turn with him in their hearts. This little rite, called by its Coptic opening words “Efnoti Nai Nan” — “O God, have mercy upon us” — is one of the richest in the whole service, because in the space of a few seconds it gathers up the whole posture of the servant before God.

We begin facing the East — toward the altar, toward the rising sun, toward the Lord who is Himself the Dayspring. We plead: “God have mercy upon us, settle mercy upon us, have compassion upon us.” This is the first word of every Christian prayer: Kyrie eleison. Before anything else is asked, mercy is asked.

Then the priest turns to the North — in the older reading of the compass, the direction of rejection and of cold. The prayer becomes: “Hear us.” We plead for the Lord to listen to us in spite of all the coldness of our own hearts, all the moments when we ourselves have refused to hear Him. Then he turns West — toward the congregation, toward the whole people of God gathered behind him. The prayer is: “Bless us.” We ask the blessing for everyone in the nave, for the whole Church stretching outward from it. Then he turns South — the direction, in older geographies, of strength and of steady light. The prayer is: “Keep us.” We ask the mighty hand of the Lord to hold us in His keeping.

And then the priest turns back to the East, closing the circle where it began. The prayer with which he closes is the fullness of what has been unfolding: “Take away Your anger from us, visit us with Your salvation, and forgive us our sins.” Every direction has been asked; the Lord has been placed over every horizon of our life. Then we stand facing Him again — the same Lord at whose feet we first began — and ask, last of all, that His salvation be visited upon us and that our sins be forgiven. The servant who grows up praying this rite has learned that the Lord is not in one direction of our lives but in all of them.

Living the Raising of Incense

All of this is easy to pass over. The service is short; the hymns are familiar; the incense is quiet. But if we will let it, the Raising of Incense will form our whole life in small and lasting ways. It will teach us to begin the day with the Lord's Prayer in our mouth and to end it the same way. It will teach us to thank before we ask. It will teach us that our own little daily offering is acceptable to God only because it is laid upon the one offering of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will teach us to confess often, quietly, without drama, as the incense rises. It will teach us to let the priest's hand be lifted over us, and to receive the Lord's blessing in every direction of our lives.

A servant who will attend the Raising of Incense faithfully, weekday as well as weekend, will find that his own heart becomes, slowly, a little like the censer — warm, quiet, its smoke rising, its fire kept by another hand. He will find himself poured out, drop by drop, as the drink offering upon the daily sacrifice of Christ.

May the Lord, who is Himself the true morning and evening sacrifice, accept our incense every day of our lives. May He receive us, with Abel and Noah and Abraham and Aaron and Zachariah, into the long communion of those who have brought an offering of contrite love. And may the smoke of our prayer, in our own generation, rise with the prayer of all the saints upon the golden altar which is before His throne — now, and at all times, and unto the age of all ages. Amen.



Review Questions

1. Describe the structure of the service. (A: We say "Our Father," the Thanksgiving prayer, the prayer of incense during the verses of Cymbals of Joy, we recite the litanies; next comes the procession of incense during Doxologies, then mercy prayers, followed by the holy Gospel, a few short litanies, and finally, the conclusion of the service.)
2. How was incense used in the Old Testament? (Sample A: After the person raises the incense and offers the animal sacrifices on the altar of burnt offering, and was purified in the basin, he was then able to pray to God who had accepted his prayers as a sweet savor upon the altar of incense.)
3. Which verse did St. John Chrysostom speak on, regarding this topic? (A: 2 Timothy 4:6)
4. True or false? Vespers and Matins are not meant to be prayed out loud. (A: False)
5. True or false? Our Lord is essentially the ultimate sacrifice. (A: True)



Books & References

Scripture: Genesis 1:5 • Exodus 30 • Leviticus 16:21 • Numbers 28–29 • Psalm 5:3; 51:16–17; 141:2 • Song of Songs 1:3 • Luke 1:9 • John 1:29 • 1 Corinthians 5:7 • Ephesians 5:2 • Philippians 2:17 • 2 Timothy 4:6 • Hebrews 10:11–14 • Revelation 8:3–4

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- Abu I-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy (especially Homily on 2 Timothy 4).
- 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.

Divine Liturgy I: Overview & Offertory

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The Divine Liturgy is the heart of the Church. Everything else we have received — the Scriptures, the Fathers, the feasts, the rhythms of prayer — either prepares us for it, flows out of it, or draws us back to it. In this lesson we stand at the beginning of that great mystery. We trace it from the Upper Room of St. Mark to the altars of our own parishes. We look at the three Liturgies we have inherited — of St. Basil, of St. Gregory, and of St. Cyril — and at the long arc of prayer that leads from the Hour Prayers through the Offertory to the Distribution of the Mysteries. Finally we enter the Offertory itself: the vesting, the hand-washing, the choosing of the Lamb, the procession around the altar. What appears on the surface to be a long preparation is in fact the Church already kneeling at Calvary and already waiting at the empty tomb.

The First Liturgy: From the Upper Room to Alexandria

The Divine Liturgy was not invented by a committee of theologians. It was given. On the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord took bread in His hands, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." He took the cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:26–28). The house in which He spoke these words belonged, by a long tradition of the Church, to the mother of St. Mark the Evangelist. That same upper room would see the tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. The first Eucharist and the birth of the Church happened under the same roof.

St. Mark himself was born in a devout Jewish household and was trained in the Scriptures from his childhood. Through his family he was bound to St. Peter by blood and by discipleship, and from Peter he learned the faith. When he traveled with Barnabas and Paul and eventually carried the Gospel into Egypt, he did not bring a loose memory of a meal. He brought an ordered prayer, a way of doing what the Lord had commanded.

"Do this in remembrance of Me." Luke 22:19

In Alexandria, after the conversion of Anianus the cobbler and the growth of a small but vigorous community, St. Mark set down the Liturgy that the Church of Egypt would pray after him. From that first Alexandrian Liturgy grew the Liturgy of St. Cyril. Alongside it, through the centuries, the Coptic Church received and kept the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great and the Liturgy of St. Gregory the

Theologian. These three Liturgies are not three religions; they are three voices of one Body, each reaching up to the one altar in heaven.

The Three Liturgies of the Coptic Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates the Eucharist from three Liturgies. All three are ancient, all three are Orthodox, and all three carry us to the same Body and the same Blood. They differ only in voice — in the way each Father leads the Church into the single mystery of the Cross.

The Liturgy of St. Basil was written by St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. It is the Liturgy we pray most often, measured and theological, shaped by the same mind that gave the Church the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Liturgy of St. Gregory was written by St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople and the close friend of St. Basil. It is the one Liturgy among the three addressed to the Son rather than to the Father, and it burns with personal fire — the Church speaking to Christ face to face. The Liturgy of St. Cyril is the direct descendant of St. Mark's original, translated from Greek into Coptic by St. Cyril of Alexandria, the Pillar of the Faith. It is the oldest in spirit and the most austere, and it preserves the particular shape of the Alexandrian tradition.

	Liturgy of St. Basil	Liturgy of St. Gregory	Liturgy of St. Cyril
Author	St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea	St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople	St. Mark (in Greek), translated into Coptic by St. Cyril of Alexandria
Addressed to	God the Father	God the Son	God the Father
Placement of litanies	After the consecration	After the consecration	Before the consecration
Common usage	Prayed most days	Prayed on feasts and days of joy	Prayed on occasion, especially in Great Lent and the Feast of St. Mark; many tunes lost

The difference in the placement of the litanies carries a quiet theology. In the Liturgies of St. Basil and St. Gregory, the litanies come after the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ — as if to say, now that the Lord Himself is on the altar, we gather up every need of the world and lay it before Him. In the Liturgy of St. Cyril, the litanies come first — as if to say, let us clear every earthly concern out of the way now, so that when Christ is present on the altar our eyes and hearts are fixed on Him alone. Neither approach is a correction of the other. Both are Orthodox. Both teach us something true about what it means to stand before the Lord of glory.

"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you."
John 14:2

The Structure of the Holy Liturgy

The Liturgy does not begin with the Offertory. It begins long before, in the quiet hours of prayer that bring the Church to the altar. To pray the Liturgy well is to enter at the door and not climb through the window. Our fathers have mapped the whole rhythm as follows:

- The 9th, 11th, and 12th Hour Prayers of the Agpeya
- Vespers Praise and the Vespers Raising of Incense
- The Midnight Hour Prayer and the Midnight Praises
- The 1st Hour Prayer, the Prime Praises, and the Prime Raising of Incense
- The 3rd and 6th Hour Prayers
- The Offertory
- The Liturgy of the Word
- The Liturgy of the Faithful
- The Distribution of the Holy Mysteries

Each stage has its own voice. The Hour Prayers stretch our day on the frame of Christ's Passion. The Praises join us to the angels who already stand around the throne. The Raising of Incense gathers the fragrance of our confession into one rising column. The Offertory lays the gifts upon the altar. The Liturgy of the Word opens the Scriptures so that we may know the One we are about to receive. The Liturgy of the Faithful consecrates the gifts. The Distribution places the Lord upon our tongues and within our hearts.

At the center of it all stands the Eucharist — from the Greek *eucharistia*, thanksgiving. A Sacrament, from the Latin word for that which is holy, corresponds to the Greek word *mysterion*, mystery. Our fathers have taught us that a Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace: something we can see, and something we cannot. The bread we can see; the Body we cannot. The wine we can see; the Blood we cannot. The priest we can see; the Lord who works through him we cannot. The Liturgy is this whole structure of visible things opening onto unseen glory.

*"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"* 1
Corinthians 10:16

Why So Much Repetition?

At first hearing, the Liturgy seems to circle back on itself. The Creed is prayed more than once. Graciously Accord is heard again and again. The priest says a petition in one language and the deacon answers with nearly the same words in another. To an untrained ear this can feel like unnecessary

repetition. It is not. It is the sediment of history laid down carefully, layer upon layer, so that no branch of the Church's tradition is lost.

The Vespers Raising of Incense and the Prime Raising of Incense are almost identical because they were born of different communities. Christians of Jewish background were accustomed to gathering on Saturday evenings, according to the older pattern of the synagogue. Christians from the Gentile world gathered on Sunday mornings, the day of the Resurrection. When the Church drew these two families into one, she did not ask either to forget what it had learned. She set the Liturgy on Sunday morning and kept the Saturday evening prayer as a vigil of preparation. What looks like repetition is in fact memory — the Church refusing to forget where her children came from.

The great echoes in the service come also from the joining of two streams of prayer: the Agpeya, which grew up in the monasteries, and the Psalmody, which grew up in the city churches. The monks prayed the Psalms by the hour; the city parishes trained their people in the faith through hymnody and theological verse. Over time these two rivers ran into one bed, and certain prayers — the Introduction to the Creed, the Creed itself, Hail to You, Graciously Accord — appeared in both and were kept in both. To lose them from one side would have been to amputate a living tradition.

The back-and-forth of priest and deacon has two explanations, and both are true. The priest, facing east, addresses God: "Remember, O Lord..." The deacon, facing the people, addresses the congregation: "Pray for..." One prays to the Father; the other calls the children to join their father's prayer. At the same time, many of these paired lines are given in Coptic by the priest and in Greek by the deacon, so that in the early Church no believer — whether a Coptic-speaking Egyptian or a Greek-speaking foreigner — was excluded from the prayer of the Body. What began as pastoral care for the whole people of God has become a small sign of our catholicity.

"That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." John 17:21

The Offertory: Vestments, Preparation, and the Washing of Hands

The Offertory is the rite by which the bread and wine are brought to the altar to become the Body and Blood of Christ. Before anything is placed on the altar, the priest and the deacons are themselves prepared. They put on their vestments, they pray the canonical hours, and the priest washes his hands three times. Only then does he go out to choose the Lamb.

Every vestment says something. The stole laid across the deacon's shoulder evokes the wings of the angels who stand in constant readiness before God. The white garments of the priests and deacons recall the heavenly multitude that St. John the Theologian saw "standing before the throne... clothed with white robes" (Revelation 7:9). The altar is prepared with the same care that would be given to the Upper Room in Jerusalem. What was done once in a rented room in Zion is done again here, in our own church, because the Host is the same.

The washing of hands is no small matter. The priest washes three times, and the Scriptures he quietly prays are prayers of repentance rather than of hygiene:

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice." Psalm 51:7-8

"I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O Lord, that I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all Your wondrous works." Psalm 26:6-7

Behind these prayers stands the whole priestly discipline of the Old Covenant, where the priests of the Temple were commanded to wash before they approached the sacrifice. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, preaching to the newly baptized in the fourth century, explains why the Christian hand-washing is not about dust on the fingers but dirt on the soul:

"You saw the deacon who offered the water for the washing of the hands of the celebrant and to the presbyters who encircled the altar of God. Not that he offered this water on account of any bodily uncleanness, for we did not enter the church unwashed; rather the ablution is a symbol of our obligation to be clean from all sins and transgressions. The hands symbolize action. So by washing them we signify plainly the purity and blamelessness of our conduct." St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V

The priest is asking for a clean heart before he stretches out his hand toward the altar. Every member of the congregation is invited to make the same prayer their own. None of us approaches the Body of the Lord on the strength of our own worthiness. We approach on the strength of His mercy.

The Offertory: Choosing the Lamb

When the priest has washed his hands, he leaves the sanctuary to choose the Lamb. The bread that will become the Body of Christ is called the Korban — a Hebrew word meaning offering. Every element in the making of this bread carries Christ within it like a prophecy already fulfilled.

The Korban is made of wheat, for our Lord Himself said:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." John 12:24

The wheat is crushed to become flour, for Isaiah prophesied that the Servant of the Lord would be "bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Yeast is added to the dough, representing the weight of the world's sin that the Lord bore in His own body; as the loaf is baked, the yeast dies in the oven, just as Christ put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Hebrews 9:26). The loaf is shaped like a circle with no beginning and no end, an image of the eternal Son who is "without father, without mother... having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). It is also the image of the Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2).

Around the Korban the priest and the deacon see twelve small crosses stamped into the bread, with one larger cross in the center. The twelve are the twelve disciples; the center is the Lord. Three points of the cross are pierced in remembrance of the three nails; the Spadikon, the central square (Greek for master), is pressed down into the loaf as the Body that holds all the rest together. The loaf must be whole and without break, for the Body of the Lord on the Cross was broken for us but not broken from itself. "Not one of His bones shall be broken" (John 19:36).

When the priest selects the loaf, he rubs it gently with slightly wet hands. This may well be an echo of the ancient rite on the Day of Atonement, where the high priest would lay his hands on the head of the sacrificial animal, transferring the sins of the people onto the offering (Leviticus 16). The priest prays, "Grant, O Lord, that our sacrifice may be accepted in Thy sight for my sins and for the ignorance of Thy people." Like Aaron, he confesses first for himself and only then for those entrusted to him.

After the Lamb is chosen, the priest wraps it in a veil. Behind this silent action stands the memory of another evening:

"Joseph of Arimathea... took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus... brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury." John 19:38–40

The Lamb is now ready to be carried to His tomb.

The Procession of the Lamb

The priest lifts the veiled Lamb and begins to walk around the altar. The deacons take up their tapers and go before him. The congregation lifts the ancient cry of Alel — Korban: "Praise the offering! Praise the great exchange!" For this is indeed the great exchange. The sinless Son of God takes upon Himself the sins of the world, and we in return receive the righteousness of Christ.

As the priest walks, he places his hand upon the Lamb and prays an inaudible prayer, naming before God those who have asked for prayers, those who are sick, those who are suffering. The congregation's own response is nothing other than the oldest cry of the human heart in the presence of God: "Lord, have mercy."

"God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Luke 18:13

The procession is no abstract choreography. It is the bearing of the Body of Christ to the tomb. The priest and the deacon stand in for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the two men who carried the Lord on that Friday evening at dusk. The deacons with their lit candles stand in for the angels who are always said by the Fathers to have attended the Lord throughout His passion, His death, and His burial. The priest places the Lamb upon the altar as upon a tomb hewn from rock.

Then comes the sealing. A cloth called the Procverin is laid over the chalice; this is the stone that was rolled against the door of the sepulcher. The triangular veil set upon it is the seal that was fixed to the stone. All of this is done in near silence, because we are now standing at the tomb of the Lord. The rest

of the Liturgy will unfold from this point forward as a slow, luminous movement from tomb to Resurrection.

The Signing, the Thanksgiving, and the Absolution of the Ministers

Three brief rites bring the Offertory to its close. First comes the Signing of the Offering: the priest traces the sign of the Cross over the bread and the wine, invoking God's blessing upon the gifts that will soon be changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Cross is set upon the gifts from the first moment, because the altar can never be separated from Golgotha.

Next comes the Prayer of Thanksgiving. The priest lifts the Church's heart to God in gratitude — for our creation, for our redemption, for the Son given for us, for the Spirit poured out upon us, for the gifts lying before us. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving, and every Liturgy begins with it because we come to this altar not as people who are owed anything by God, but as people who have been given everything.

Finally the priest prays the Absolution of the Ministers — a quiet, deliberate prayer for the forgiveness and purification of those who stand at the altar. None of them is worthy of what comes next. None of us is. The one standing at the altar confesses his weakness in front of God, and the whole congregation bows in its own confession. Only then is the Church ready to enter the Liturgy of the Word.

“For Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.” 1
Corinthians 5:7–8

Everything up to this point has been preparation — hand-washing, vesting, choosing, wrapping, processing, sealing. None of it is ornamental. The Offertory is the Church learning, once again, how to approach the Most Holy. We do not rush toward the altar; we approach it slowly, with clean hands and a cleaner heart, bearing the Lamb in our own arms as Joseph bore Him once. We are not spectators at a ritual. We are pallbearers at the burial of the Lord — and, because of the empty tomb, we are also the first witnesses of the Resurrection.

Walking Through the Liturgy with the Whole Self

To know the shape of the Liturgy without entering it is to starve in a full house. The knowledge we have just laid out is meant to be carried back into our next Liturgy, and the next, and the next — not as information but as a disposition of the heart. When the priest vests, we vest ourselves in Christ (Galatians 3:27). When he washes his hands, we ask for a clean conscience. When he chooses the Lamb, we remember that we too have been chosen — in our baptism, in our chrismation, in every moment of repentance.

When the procession moves around the altar to the cry of Alel — Korban, we stop in our tracks and remember what is happening: the Body of the Lord is being carried to the tomb in our presence, and it is being carried for our sake. When the chalice is covered and the seal is laid, we wait in the silence of Holy Saturday, knowing that the next words of the service are already the first whispers of Easter morning.

In this way the Liturgy becomes not an hour among hours but the axis on which all our hours turn. Everything we do outside the church — our work, our study, our fasting, our friendships, our service — draws its strength from what is laid upon the altar, and returns to the altar at the next Liturgy to be laid there again.

“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

The Liturgy teaches us how to become what we receive. May we learn to stand at the altar with the reverence of Joseph and Nicodemus, the watchfulness of the myrrh-bearing women, and the joy of those who have seen the empty tomb.



Review Questions

1. Where was the first Eucharist held? (A: St. Mark's home with Jesus Christ-The Last Supper)
2. List the structure of the Holy Liturgy. (A: 9th, 11th and 12th Hour Prayers, Vespers Praise, Vespers Raising of Incense, Midnight Hour Prayer, Midnight Praise, 1st Hour Prayer, Prime Praise, Prime Raising of Incense, 3rd & 6th Hour Prayers, The Offertory, The Liturgy of the Word, The Liturgy of the Faithful, The Distribution of the Holy Communion)
3. What are the 3 Liturgies that the Coptic Orthodox Church prays from? (A: The Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Cyril)
4. What do the Liturgies of St. Basil and St. Cyril address? (A: God the Father)
5. The offertory consists of 6 parts, what are they? (A: Preparatory, Choosing the Lamb, Procession of the Lamb around the altar, Signing of the Offering, Prayer of Thanksgiving, The Absolution of Ministers)



Books & References

Scripture:

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- Abu I-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V (on the washing of hands and the Eucharist).
- St. Basil the Great — Liturgy of St. Basil (as prayed in the Coptic Rite).
- St. Gregory the Theologian — Liturgy of St. Gregory.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria — Liturgy of St. Cyril (translation of the Liturgy of St. Mark).
- • Fr. Athanasius Iskander, [Understanding the Liturgy](#).
- Fr. Tadros Malaty, The Divine Liturgy: An Introduction.
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Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

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).
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- St. John Chrysostom — Homilies on the Gospels and on the Pauline Epistles.
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Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Divine Liturgy III: Liturgy of the Faithful

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Having heard the Word, the Church now approaches the altar. The Liturgy of the Faithful is the holy of holies of our worship, the hour in which the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the hour in which Christ is once again "in the midst of us." From the lifting of the prosphorine at the empty tomb, through the Creed and the Holy Kiss, through the Anaphora and the Institution Narrative, to the Epiclesis, the Fraction, the Absolution, the Confession, and the Distribution, every movement bears us into the paschal mystery. This lesson walks through the whole arc.

The Three Long Litanies and the Empty Tomb

The Liturgy of the Faithful opens with the Three Long Litanies — for Peace, for the Fathers, and for the Assemblies. At the head of these litanies the priest lifts the prosphorine, the small cloth covering that has lain over the chalice since the sealing of the tomb, and he offers incense beneath it. This is no ordinary gesture. It is the first Easter morning.

"Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared."
Luke 24:1

The rising incense is the spice offered by the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb of the Lord. The lifted cloth is the first hint of the stone rolled away. The Church, standing in the person of those holy women, approaches the altar at dawn. What they found at the tomb, we will find at the altar — the Lord is risen. Before we pass through that door, however, we pray for the world that still walks in the darkness of Holy Saturday: for the peace of the Church, for the shepherds who feed us, and for the assemblies of the faithful gathered in every place on earth.

The Creed and the Washing of the Priest's Hands

Only the baptized remain at this point in the Liturgy; the Creed is the confession of those who are already inside the Body of Christ. The deacon lifts his voice: "Attend to God with wisdom. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Truly we believe in one God..." and the whole congregation joins in. The Creed is not recited in private; it is sung in unison, because it is the voice of the Church, not the voice of an individual.

Our fathers have taught us that two things are needed before we can stand at the altar: faith and love. The Creed is the Church's great act of faith. The Holy Kiss that follows will be the Church's act of love. Without both we are not ready to approach.

While the Creed is being recited, the priest washes his hands — not for the first time in this Liturgy, but now with a different weight. He washes three times, in honor of the Holy Trinity, and then faces west toward the people and shakes the water from his hands. Three things are being said at once.

First, the priest reminds the whole Church that Holy Communion must not be taken lightly. Hands must be clean. Hearts must be cleaner. Second, the priest "washes his hands" of the guilt of those who receive unworthily; he will not carry into his own soul what a communicant chooses to carry into his. Third, the priest's hand must be clean to touch the Body of Christ, because in a few minutes those very hands will lift the Lamb of God. What the priest does visibly, the rest of the Church is called to do invisibly.

"I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O Lord." Psalm 26:6

The Prayer of Reconciliation and the Holy Kiss

Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken relationship. In the Prayer of Reconciliation the priest asks, on behalf of all of us, for forgiveness. We confess ourselves sinners, and we ask to be made worthy of the Body and Blood we are about to receive. The grace of forgiveness does not stay in the sanctuary; it spreads through the whole church, and it gives peace to every heart.

At this moment the priest lifts the seal from the chalice. The triangular veil comes off; the stone is rolled away. The prosphorine is raised, and Christ rises in our midst. The deacon then cries out:

"Greet one another with a holy kiss." 2 Corinthians 13:12

This is no empty greeting. It is the sign that the whole Church has become one heart and one mind. Faith has been proclaimed in the Creed. Hope has been stirred by the open tomb. Love has been enacted in the holy kiss. Now, and only now, is the Church ready to enter the Anaphora.

The Anaphora — Lifting Up Our Hearts

Anaphora is a Greek word meaning "lifting up." The whole central prayer of the Liturgy bears this name, because it is the prayer in which priest and people together lift their hearts to heaven. Facing west, the priest proclaims, "The Lord be with you all," and the congregation answers, "And also with your spirit." He then crosses himself and turns: "Lift up your hearts." The answer is both an invitation and a confession: "We have them with the Lord."

This is not a figure of speech. The priest and the people are asked to set aside, as with a physical motion, every earthly concern. The anxiety about work, the fight that happened in the car on the way to church, the question of what we will eat after the Liturgy — all of it is set down at the door of the Anaphora. St. Paul gives the reason:

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." Colossians 3:1–2

Then the priest crosses himself again and says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord." The word Eucharist means thanksgiving, and the whole Liturgy takes its name from these words. The people answer, "It is meet and right." The priest lifts his covered hands in the posture of the Seraphim who stand before the throne, and he prays three ancient prayers — "Meet and Right...", "Before Whom stand...", "You are He around Whom stand..." — drawing the Church up to the very doors of heaven.

The Church then breaks into the Agios, a hymn that is almost a small creed of its own. In three stanzas it confesses the faith we have just proclaimed:

- "Who formed us, created us, and placed us in the paradise of joy... when we disobeyed Your commandment... You visited us through Your holy prophets, and in the last days You manifested Yourself through Your Only-Begotten Son Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin St. Mary."
- "Was incarnate, became man, taught us the way of salvation, granted us the birth from above through water and Spirit, and gave Himself up unto death on account of our sins."
- "He rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into the heavens, sat at the right hand of the Father, and appointed a day for recompense."

Creation, fall, prophets, incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, judgment to come — the whole arc of salvation is gathered into three breaths.

The Institution Narrative

At the heart of the Anaphora stands the Institution Narrative — the telling of what Christ did and said on the night He was betrayed. The priest stops narrating about the Lord and begins speaking in the Lord's own voice. The deacons surround the altar with lit candles. The priest places two corporals on the altar, those small linen cloths that will hold the sacred fragments without loss. The deacon brings the censer, and the priest censes his hands three times, a final purification before he touches what is about to become the Body of Christ.

Then he takes the bread in his hands. The words are no longer an explanation; they are a re-enactment. The priest does not say, "Jesus took bread and said, take eat." He says, as Christ Himself said,

"Take, eat from it, all of you; for this is My Body which is broken for you and for many, given for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of Me." From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after Matthew 26:26 and 1 Corinthians 11:24

And over the chalice, he prays:

“Drink from it, all of you; for this is My Blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of Me.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after Matthew 26:27–28

In the Old Testament, when the high priest spoke the holy name of God on the Day of Atonement, the whole congregation prostrated themselves to the ground. Our Church has inherited something of that reverence. In these moments at the altar, the congregation does not crane its neck to see; it lowers its head to pray. What is happening is the working of the Holy Spirit, not a piece of liturgical theater.

The Epiclesis — the Descent of the Holy Spirit

The Epiclesis is the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts. It is the moment in which the Church asks God the Father to send His Spirit upon the bread and wine and upon the people, so that what lies on the altar may become what the Church confesses it to be: the Body and Blood of Christ. The priest bows low and prays:

“And we ask You, O Lord our God, we Your sinful and unworthy servants; we worship You by the pleasure of Your goodness: that Your Holy Spirit descend upon us and upon these gifts set forth, and purify them, change them, and manifest them as a sanctification of Your saints.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil (Coptic)

The Epiclesis asks for three things at once. The Spirit is asked to purify the gifts, to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ, and to manifest them as a sanctification for the faithful. The change is not a symbol, and it is not magic; it is the work of the Spirit of God, the same Spirit who brooded over the waters at creation, who overshadowed the Virgin at the incarnation, and who fell on the Apostles at Pentecost.

The Epiclesis is also the moment in which the Church itself is remade. The Spirit is asked to descend "upon us" before He is asked to descend "upon these gifts." The Eucharist does not sanctify the bread in isolation; it sanctifies the Body, and the Body is the Church. What is changed on the altar is changed in us.

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 12:13

The Anamnesis and the Seven Short Litanies

Anamnesis is a Greek word meaning "remembrance," but it means far more than an act of memory. In the biblical sense, to remember is to make present. The priest declares:

“For every time you eat of this Bread and drink of this Cup you preach My death, confess My Resurrection, and remember Me till I come.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after 1 Corinthians 11:26

"As we too commemorate His Holy Passion, His Resurrection from the dead, His ascension into the heavens..." The Anamnesis is not a souvenir of Calvary. It is Calvary made present. What is offered on the altar is the one sacrifice, offered once and for all by Christ on the Cross, now brought into the here and now for the salvation of those gathered around it.

Having stood at Calvary and Easter together, the Church now begins to carry the world up to the altar. This is the work of the Seven Short Litanies: for peace; for the Pope and the bishops; for the clergy and the deacons; for the purity of the people; for the salvation of the world; for the waters, the seeds, and the fruits of the earth; and for the gifts just offered. Every need of creation is laid at the feet of the risen Lord who is now really present on the altar.

After the litanies, the Church makes her Commemoration of the Saints. She does not attempt to name them all; she names those who laid the foundation of the faith — the forefathers of the Church, the fathers and mothers of the monastic life, the pillars of every age. We name them because they are not absent. The Liturgy that we celebrate on earth is the same Liturgy that they celebrate before the throne.

The Introduction to the Fraction, the Fraction, and the Absolution

The Fraction is the breaking of the Holy Bread. Before it is done, the priest offers a sign of peace to the people, and then he steps aside — a small and significant motion. He is saying, in effect, I can do no more. The peace that comes next does not come from me. Christ is on the altar. Let Him give it.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

John 14:27

Then the priest breaks the Bread. The Fraction has its own prayer for every season of the Coptic year — one for the Nativity, another for Great Lent, another for the Resurrection, another for the Apostles' Fast, and so on — so that the Body of the Lord is broken with the voice of the season around it. This is one of the holiest moments of the entire Liturgy. The congregation stands in reverence, silent and attentive. What the priest holds in his hands is the sacrifice of Calvary.

After the Fraction, the whole Church recites the Our Father, and the deacon bids the people bow their heads. The bow is not an act of worship but of reception; it is the posture for receiving absolution. While the heads of the Church are bowed, the priest prays the prayer of Absolution, asking Christ to forgive our sins and make us worthy of the Communion that is coming.

A note often missed: the Absolution is not a ritual for confession. Those who have serious sin are expected to have sought absolution through the sacrament of Confession before they approach the Liturgy. The Absolution at this moment is a final cleansing of small things, a final pouring of mercy before the Lord is placed on our tongues.

The Confession and the Distribution

The priest now raises his voice once more. He takes the Body in his hand and proclaims to the congregation what is about to happen. This is the Confession of faith in the Real Presence:

"This is in truth the Body and Blood of Emmanuel our God. Amen." From the prayers of the Confession in the Liturgy

The deacon answers on behalf of the whole Church: "We too believe and confess that this is the faith by which we partake of His Holy Body and Blood." This is no abstract theology. It is a question the Lord Himself once asked, and the Church's answer has never changed:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." John 6:53

No one should approach the chalice with a heart that does not confess this. A communicant who comes to the altar in doubt, in insincerity, or in unrepented sin does not diminish the Eucharist; he injures himself. This is why the Church insists that the Confession be made with the lips and with the heart together.

Then the congregation rises from its bowed worship and the Distribution begins. The choir sings Psalm 150 — "Praise God in His sanctuary... Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." The air of the church changes. We have passed through the Cross and the empty tomb; now we stand inside the Resurrection, and we sing.

The posture matters. The faithful stand to receive. They do not slouch, do not put their hands in their pockets, do not talk, do not rush. They receive the Body on their tongue and the Blood on their lips with the same reverence with which the myrrh-bearing women received the news of the Resurrection. This is the food that will carry us through the week. This is the medicine of immortality. This is what saves us from the evil of this world.

"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." John 6:56

The End of the Liturgy: Dismissals and Going Forth

When the Distribution is complete, the priest cleanses the vessels of the altar with great care. Not a single fragment of the Body of Christ may be left behind. After this comes a small and tender rite that is easy to miss. The priest uses water to dismiss the Angel of the Sacrifice. The Church teaches that every Liturgy has its own angel, assigned by God to watch over the altar and carry the prayers of the congregation. When the Liturgy ends, that angel is sent back to heaven with a blessing. Then the priest uses water to bless and dismiss the people themselves.

The two gestures belong together. The heavenly servants and the earthly servants are both released from their sacred duty with the same hand and the same water. The altar is cleared; the angel returns to the throne; the faithful are sent out into the world.

But "sent out" is not the same as "done." The Greek word from which our word "Mass" is sometimes derived, *missa*, is simply the word for dismissal. The Liturgy ends with a sending. We are not sent away

from Christ; we are sent with Christ, carrying Him within us to the streets, to the homes, to the offices, to the classrooms of our own week.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19–20

The Liturgy of the Faithful teaches us how to become what we have received. We have stood at the tomb with the myrrh-bearing women; we have stood at Calvary with the Mother and the Beloved Disciple; we have stood in the heavenly throne room with the Seraphim; we have received the risen Lord Himself into our bodies. Now we step back out of the doors of the church as people who have met the Lord of glory, and we carry that meeting into every ordinary hour. Amen.



Review Questions

1. When the Priest lifts the prosphering and offers incense under it, what does this represent? (A: It is to commemorate when the 3 Mary's came early Sunday to Christ's tomb)
2. In our church the Creed is important because we need 2 things before we can continue with the liturgy, what are these 2 things? (A: Faith and Love)
3. The hymn Agios is a hymn filled with the basics of Christian dogma, what are they? (A: Formed us, created us...disobeyed his commandments, Was incarnate, became man, granted us the birth, He rose from the dead, ascended into the heavens, appointed a day for recompense.)
4. What is The Epiclesis? (A: The Epiclesis is a prayer that the Holy Spirit descends upon the Bread and Wine and changes them into the Body and the Blood of Christ and to sanctify the whole church members)
5. What is the Anamnesis? (A: It is a living proclamation for Jesus' death and resurrection and remembrance of Him until His Coming.)



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.

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