

The Roots of Church Tradition

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

The Coptic Church is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world with a rich history and distinctive traditions.

Why is Tradition Important in the Coptic Church?

- ❖ Tradition plays a significant role in shaping Orthodox Christian's cultural and religious identity. The importance of tradition lies in its ability to provide a sense of continuity and belonging to a community that has endured for centuries.
- ❖ Orthodox Christian tradition is built on the teachings of the apostles and church fathers, and it encompasses a range of practices and customs, including liturgy, sacraments, prayer, fasting, and feasting. These traditions offer a spiritual framework that guides the faithful in their daily lives and connects them to their faith's rich history and heritage.
- ❖ The word **Tradition** does not indicate a “limitation of the past” but rather it means biblically “**delivering a deposit and receiving it**”. These traditions/rites have been passed down through generations, serving as a vital link to the ancient traditions of the early Christian Church.

A generation delivers the faith, and another receives it

- ❖ Through engaging with tradition, we can develop a deeper understanding of our faith, its values, and its teachings.

In a constantly changing world, tradition provides a stable foundation and a sense of purpose that helps us navigate the complexities of modern life with confidence and faith!

Why follow tradition in Biblical Interpretation as provided by the early Fathers of the Church?

- Jesus Christ established many traditions himself and passed them down to the apostles (example: baptism, Eucharist). These sacraments and liturgical practices were kept by the apostles and their successors.
- The patristic fathers were the earliest and most influential Christian theologians. They lived in an era closer to the time of Christ and the apostles, so their interpretations of the Bible were shaped by the teachings of those who had direct contact with Christ.
- Following the tradition and patristic fathers provides a sense of continuity and coherence in biblical interpretation and ensures that our understanding of the Bible is rooted in the same beliefs/practices handed down through the centuries. **It is a safeguard against individual interpretation and any personal bias!**

Liturgy

- The Coptic Church is known for its rich and ancient liturgical practices, which are deeply rooted in symbolism and meaning.
- The word "Liturgy" in Greek means "a public service undertaken on behalf of the people". it comes from "**Lieto,**" meaning "**People.**" and "**Ergia,**" meaning "**work**". The church used this term since the apostolic age to cover worship organized by her. In the course of time, this term has come to be particularly applied to the performance of the service of Eucharist.
- The "Liturgy" refers to the Christian remembrance and celebration of Jesus Christ's propitiatory sacrifice of His body and blood. This sacrament can be traced back to times of the Apostles. It has been mentioned by St. Paul:

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." (Corinthians-1 11:23-26)

Early Church Liturgy

- The first liturgy was prayed by Christ in St. Mark's house in Jerusalem. The liturgy then was passed down from the Apostles to their successors, the bishops, as an oral tradition. Similarly, to how the bible was also passed down.
- The liturgy was commanded to writing after heresies started to appear in the church later on.
- The fact that liturgical text arises from 4th century does not indicate that the liturgy was established at that time. It was just recorded in writing in the 4th century.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has **three traditional liturgies**, all were originally written in Greek and then translated into Coptic.

St Basil Liturgy	The Gregorian Liturgy	St Cyril Liturgy
St. Basil the great	St. Gregory the Theologian	St. Mark & St. Cyril
The focus is on the FATHER who loved us and reconciled us with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ, whom He sent for our atonement.	The focus is on the SON (Christ the incarnate) who redeemed us by surrendering Himself up to death in atonement of our sins to bring us closer to the Father.	St. Mark was the actual writer of this liturgy, but it was attributed to St. Cyril (24 th Pope) because it was orally handed over to him but he recorded it in writing and translated it to Coptic.
Used in ordinary days	Used in feasts and occasions	Rarely used because of its duration. Typically prayed in Lent
	(Rome – 6 th century)	(Alexandria – early Church)

- Of all the four early centers of Christianity (Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, Jerusalem), Alexandria used the liturgy that is considered the oldest of all (St. Mark's liturgy).

Did you Know!

Versions of St. Mark's Liturgy exist in Ge'ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia.

- St Mark's liturgy was the main one in the Coptic church in early centuries but then the Church switched to St. Basil liturgy later on.
- The Church in Constantinople used to pray an expanded version of the Egyptian St. Basil liturgy but later adopted a shorter one attributed to St. John Chrysostom.
- The Copts clung to their Eucharistic tradition! The 20th century had witnessed a liturgical movement across Churches worldwide. Many churches started to revisit or completely change their liturgies. However, the Coptic Church is not a Church of change but rather one of tradition. We've had our liturgy since the early Church.

Brief Overview of the Sections of the Holy Liturgy

The Liturgy is divided into three main sections:

- **The Offertory** (*Offering of the Lamb*)
- **Penitential Rite** (*Catechumen or Liturgy of the Word*) - This can be attended by those who (in ancient times) were preparing to join the faith and be baptized.
- **Eucharistic Prayers** (*Liturgy of the Faithful*) - This covers the consecration of the sacrament until it is distributed to the congregation.

The Offertory:

- Agpeya Prayers
- Offering of the Lamb
- Thanksgiving Prayer
- Absolution of the Servants

Did you Know!

This is the part where the priest and the deacons put on their vestments as **Psalm 29** is being read. Once they have their garments, **Psalm 92** is read

Every rite can be traced back to a biblical reference:

Priest preparing the altar	symbolizing the Upper Room where our Lord sent His disciples to prepare for the Passover
Psalms read before offering of the Lamb	as there are prophecies about the incarnation of Christ for the salvation of the world.
Choosing the Lamb with his right hand on top of his left	Same way as Jacob when he blessed his sons (Gen 48:12-14)
Wiping the bread with water	Symbolizing the baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist
Procession around the altar	Symbol for carrying the body of Jesus wrapped in linen to lay him in the tomb. The priest and the deacon represent Joseph and Nicodemus
Priest carries the Lamb with both hands holding it against his head	Remembering Simeon the elder when he carried the child Jesus and proceeded around the altar
Mixing wine with water	Remembering the blood and water that gushed out when Christ was pierced in His side
Priest covers the altar with the Prosfarine	The Prosfarine symbolizes the stone placed on the tomb and the triangular cloth/veil on top symbolizes the seal on it

The entire Offering from start to finish (from the offering to the completion of the Thanksgiving prayer) is symbolic of the entire life of Jesus Christ. Each part of the Offering and prayers is a reminder of all the stages in Christ's life, from His birth to His burial.

Note that the priest mentions the congregation in the absolution as they are considered among those serving the Holy Sacrament together with the priest, the deacon and the rest of the clergy. The church doesn't view the attending congregation as mere listeners or audience but rather servants who have their responses and hymns which they say during the sacrament.

Liturgy of the Word:

- Pauline (St Paul's epistles)
- Catholic Epistle
- Praxis (Acts)
- Synaxarium
- Gospel

These readings provide an opportunity for Biblical contemplation and teaching.

Did you Know!

In the Pauline round, the priest proceeds around the **whole** Church in remembrance of St. Paul who exerted himself in his travels to preach the message of the Lord.

The priest offers incense from left side (darkness) to the right side (light)

— Bible verses in this font are to be memorized.
 — Bible verses in this font are to be understood only.

The aim behind reading the Synaxarium (**Greek word meaning “The News”**) is to recall the lives of the saints who endured a lot for the sake of preserving their orthodox faith. The church encourages the congregation to follow the same pattern of their forefathers.

The church always celebrates the martyrdom/ departure day of saints because it's all about the good ending and not the beginning. The day commemorating the saint is considered a feast because it's the day they met their heavenly groom.

Liturgy of the Faithful:

- Creed
- Prayer of Reconciliation
- Anaphora
- Holy, Holy, Holy
- Institution Narrative (Sanctification)
- Seven Short Litanies
- Commemoration of the Saints
- Praying for the Departed
- Fraction
- Confession

Did you Know!

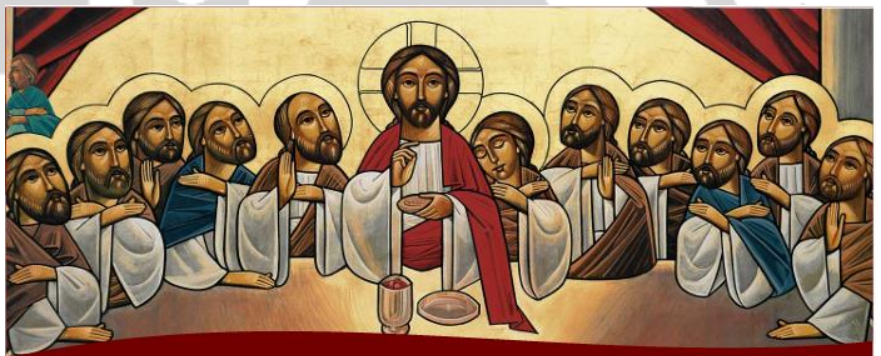
The first appearance of the Prayer of Reconciliation was in the 6th century.

It is NOT prayed on Holy Thursday!

Anaphora is a Greek term meaning “a raising up” or “an offering”

- During the Anaphora, the priest removes the Prosfarine signifying the start of the Liturgy. We have, therefore, taken our position among the heavenly in participation with their praise and thanksgiving in the presence of the Lord.
- The priest then recites the sequence of redemption: the incarnation of the Son of God, His acts among us, His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and His second coming.
- Then consecration then takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The priest says the same words spoken by Christ on the evening when the Eucharist was first instituted.

At the Lord's Supper, 'He took bread, blessed it, and broke it. (Math. 26:26)



- At this point, the seven minor litanies are prayed:
 1. **Peace** - Asking for the safety and protection of the Apostolic Church
 2. **Fathers** - Asking to strengthen the Pope & Bishop with wisdom in their Service and to maintain the right faith which has been delivered to us by the saints.
 3. **Clergy** - Asking to shepherd the priests and deacons.
 4. **Mercy** - Asking the Lord to have mercy on our souls according to His great mercy.
 5. **Place** - Asking for the safety of all cities and monasteries and all holy places
 6. **Water/Seeds/Air of heaven** - Asking the Lord to bless all the lands
 7. **Oblations** - Asking the Lord to bless all the offerings given to the Church and those who offered them.
- In Orthodox Christianity, the Church is considered the "heaven on earth" where the faithful can encounter the presence of God. The saints serve as a bridge between the struggling Church on Earth and the victorious Church in heaven. We remember the saints, their struggle against sin, as well as their virtues. Most of the mentioned saints are ones who fought for the faith.

“all the spirits of the righteous perfected in the faith.”

Did you Know!

Commemoration of the saints is rooted in the commandment of Christ himself when He praised the woman who anointed His feet and said:

*"Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told **as a memorial to her.**" (Matthew 26:13)*

- The celebration of the liturgy is preceded by two special services, of which one is observed in the morning just before the liturgy and the other the previous evening. They are known as the Morning (or Evening) Offering of Incense.
- Today, in actual practice, the Morning Offering of Incense is often incorporated into the liturgy itself whereas the evening offering of incense (Vespers) followed by midnight praises are prayed the night before liturgy.

----- Lesson Part II -----

Coptic Hymns

*Our church has been entrusted with this great heritage of music
The core of Coptic music lies in the Divine Liturgy*

“Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:19)

- Coptic hymns are essential to any Coptic church – They reflect one of the oldest traditions! Christian liturgical music binds together the Church's tradition, rites, worship and spirituality, in a global manner.
- It is acknowledged that some of the hymns of the Coptic Orthodox Church date back to the early period of the Ancient Egyptians.
- Today, Coptic music is considered to be one of the oldest musical genres alive.

Preserving Coptic Hymns

- Coptic music is not transcribed but passed down from generation to generation.
- Prior to the ordination of Pope Kyrillos, the fourth, known as the '**Pope of the Reformation,**' there was a possibility of the complete loss of many Coptic hymns, as the Church experienced a period of weakness.
- Pope Kyrillos the fourth commanded a talented cantor, Tekla, to compile and compare all Coptic hymns and to pass them down to others to preserve the heritage of the Church.
- Cantor Takla, travelled all around Egypt gathering all hymns and comparing them. He was later ordained a priest and he diligently handed down this great treasure of hymns and rites to seven Church cantors
- In the era of Pope Kyrillos, the fifth, came the period of the flourishing and spread of Coptic hymns in Egypt. This was accomplished through the efforts of cantor Mikhail Girgis who later conducted the first audio recording of Coptic hymns.

It's not a new concept

- The Concept of praising God for Christians is not new. The three Youths were praising God in the fiery furnace as mentioned in the prayer of Azariah in the **Additions to Daniel chapter 3:**

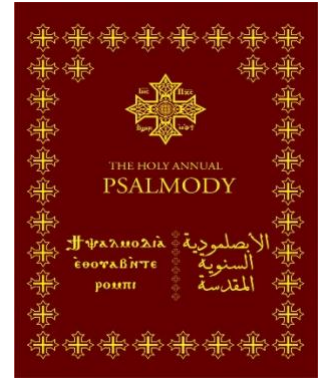
“They walked around in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord. Then Azariah stood still in the fire and prayed aloud”

- Praises were also practiced in the early Church as mentioned in the book of **Acts:**

” 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

Midnight Praises

- Midnight Praises/Tasbeha is one of the most beloved Coptic rites. It is a form of worship that involves singing hymns and psalms of praise and giving thanksgiving to God
- Through the Tasbeha, we can deepen our understanding of the **stories of the Old Testament** and further learn about the **Love of God**



Praising is a cooperative function between the Struggling Church and the Victorious Church

- The Psalmody is performed at the conclusion of the Prayers of the Midnight Hour, and before the Morning Offering of Incense. In the monasteries, it is performed daily, but in some city churches, it has become customary to perform it mostly on Sunday eve (liturgy night).
- During the papacy of St Athanasius, he kept the Alexandrian tradition of weekly overnight prayers and praises leading up to the Liturgy.
- Midnight praises are the preparation for the banquet of the King who is to come in the Liturgy. It prepares us for communion, cleanses our soul, and incorporates the theology of the Church.
- Our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us on how to receive Him through the parable of the ten virgins. We should stand praising God, lifting our hearts to Him.

“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14: 38)

Tasbeha usually consists of

Midnight Prayer	Ten thino	1 st Canticle and its Lobsh (Exodus 15)	2 nd Canticle and its Lobsh (Psalm 136)
Third Canticle (Daniel 3)	Aripsaleen (Greek Psali)	Ten-oweh Ensok (Watos Psali)	Commemoration of the Saints
Doxologies	Fourth Canticle (Psalms 148-150)	Psali	Theotokia
			Efnoti Nai Nan

Psalmody	The book contains the prayers of the Praise, and it is divided into Annual Psalmody and Kiahk Psalmody.
Hoos	A Coptic word meaning Praise. The word translates to Canticle in English
Lobsh	A Coptic word meaning Explanation
Epsaly/Psali	A Greek word meaning Song
Theotokia	A Greek word meaning Mother of God
Doxology	A Greek word meaning Glorification
Adam	A tune especially for Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday (first 3 days of the week)
Watos	A tune, especially for Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday (last 4 days)

- We start the psalmody with **Ten thino** (Arise O Children) because we become like the wise virgins who arose from the slumber and lit their lamps
- In the **first canticle**, there is a connection between Moses and the New Moses (Christ) leading the people through the sea of suffering while being chased by the Pharaoh. Like the Israelites, we ask God to deliver us from the hand of the devil as we are united behind the One savior who led us out of the land of slavery
- The **second canticle** is a psalm full of thanksgiving. During the days of David, this hymn was sung by the believers as they entered the city of Jerusalem, the Promised Land. The people remember God’s mercies as He directed them in the wilderness, helping them fight through trials and tribulations. Also, God’s mercy is emphasized each time we sing this wonderful hymn. The refrain **“for His mercy endures forever”** is repeated 28 times
- The **third canticle** is the praise of the three holy youths, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, in the fiery furnace after they refused to worship the golden image made by Nebuchadnezzar. The refrain **“Praise Him and Exalt Him above all forever”** is repeated 34 times
- The **fourth canticle** is about the whole creation praising its Creator. As we sing Psalm 149, we rejoice in our Maker for He has chosen us as the new Israel, and we have become heirs to the almighty King. In Psalm 150, we engage in “Perfect praise”. This psalm is also read during the most sacred moments of the church such as during the Holy communion. We repeat the words **“Praise Him”** 10 times which is a number that represents perfection
- After the conclusion of the Tasbeha, the liturgical services commence with the Prime Hour.

We can think of Tasbeha as a wondrous journey:

We pleaded with the Lord to help us and save from the hands of our oppressors. The Lord came in a mighty fashion and freed us from the bondage and land of sin.

Being freed from our enemies through the waters of baptism and the sacrament of confession and repentance, thanked the Lord for His love and bringing us into the new land to embark on our journey through the wilderness of life, trying to reach the promised land.

As we journey, we enter into trials and tribulations like the three youths, tortured by our enemies. Through the power of God and His presence, we escape unharmed as we behold His presence throughout troubles.

We then are joined with the saints, as we sing and proclaim their glory in singing the Commemoration and the Doxologies, inviting them to participate with us, so that we may befriend them and join them in praising God.

It can be traced all the way back

- Deriving from the ancient synagogal rites, the canticles are very old. According to Anton Baumstark, the first and third canticles were the first canticles to be used. A fragment of papyrus that was identified as a leaf from an ancient Egyptian office book was found to contain parts of these two hymns.
- In the 4th century, **St Basil the Great** spent some years in Egypt to learn about the church of Alexandria and the monasticism in Egypt. When he was interrogated about the practice of night vigils, he responded that this practice started in Egypt and now it is widespread in all the Christian world
- Also, part of the Greek text in the third canticle has been found on an ostrakon dating probably from the fifth century.
- Tradition attributes the patristic text of the Theotokias to Saint Athanasius, and Saint Ephraem of Syria, St Cyril, and St Severus of Antioch.
- The very simplicity of Psalmic hymns leads the listener to speculate that herein lies the oldest core of ancient Egyptian melody

Church rites are not limited to general practices like the Holy Liturgy, hymns, and midnight praises. Church tradition extends to seasonal events and can be traced back to the early Church

Holy Pascha Week

The holiest week of the year, known as “Holy Week” or more preferably “Pascha (aka Passover)”



Holy Pascha Week



Holy Week Today:

- The Holy Week lasts for 6 days starting after Palm Sunday through Saturday. It was not part of the “Great Fast” originally but was later appended to it.
- There are two main services from Monday to Thursday – a morning one, called the “Day” services, and an evening one called the “Eve” of the following day
- Each Day and Eve has 5 segments (called “hours”—1st, 3rd, 6th, 9th, 11th) that follow the same pattern:
 - Prophecies
 - Occasional Commentary by a Church Father (Homily)
 - Pascha Praise
 - Psalm chanted in long, sad tune (Adreeby tune)
 - Gospel
 - Exposition
 - Morning/Evening Litanies

Origins of Holy Week:

- In the early Church, different places commemorated the last week of Christ’s life on earth differently. Some a few days, some the entire week. It was originally celebrated once every 33 years!
- **In 330 AD, St. Athanasius** wrote a Festal Letter describing the Pascha fast as being 6 days long.

The addition of Pascha to the Great Lent was a significant development in the liturgical calendar of the Coptic Church and is traditionally attributed to St Athanasius

- St Athanasius wanted to emphasize the importance of Christ’s death and resurrection in the salvation of humanity. He also wanted to provide a time for the faithful to reflect on the meaning and significance of these events, and to prepare themselves for the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

- **In 1140 AD, Pope Gabriel, the 70th Pope**, reformed the Pascha rites as with the help of monks from the St. Macarius monastery. He shortened the services, selected readings from the Old and New Testament.

Pope Gabirel was the one that structured the service into 5 morning and evening hours

- **In 1200 AD, Abba Peter, Bishop of El-Bahnassa** further reformed the Pascha services by making the readings at a similar length for each hour and adding sermons many of which from Abba Shenouda the Archimandrite, whose monastery this bishop was from.
- Abba Peter also arranged the 4 gospels to be read in entirety. Matthew Tuesday, Mark Wednesday, Luke Thursday, John Saturday (Eve of Resurrection). Additionally, he established the reading of all psalms after Good Friday.

Abba Peter was the one who composed the tunes for many of the prayers