**Coptic Church Part III section 3**

**The Coptic Church And Dogmas**

**SACRAMENTAL LIFE**

**SACRAMENTS AND CHURCH LIFE**

I am delighted to write here about church sacraments, **for in fact** practising church sacraments gives us enjoyment through the exceeding love of God and the free divine grace. Such are the practical gospels in the actual church life, that through them believers discover the mystery of the Gospel.

In brief I can say that the sacraments grant us the following blessings:

**1. Practical divine grace:** If teaching the divine grace is the heart and center of the Gospel, we attain this grace through the sacraments, as it is written in the Holy Bible:

In the sacrament of Baptism, we attain the rebirth, not of our own merit nor by a human hand but by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-5; Tit. 3:5). We also receive God's adoption (Gal. 3:26, 27), attain the remission of sins (Acts 2:38) and sanctification (Eph. 5:25-26).

Through "Chrism" *(Mayroun)*we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who teaches us, guides us and sanctifies us, so that we may attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Acts 8:17; 19:5,6).

Through penance and confession, the Holy Spirit grants us the remission of sins (Matt. 16:19).

In the Eucharist, the church is lifted up as if to heaven so that she meets her heavenly Savior, participates with the heavenly host in their hymns, and partakes of the Body and the Blood of the Lord to be united with Him, established in Him and to live forever with Him

**(John** 2:3 5,55; Matt. 26:27,28; 1 Cor. 10: 17).

Through the Sacrament of holy unction, the sick who accepts to be united with Christ in His sufferings attains the remission of sins (by repentance). and the healing of his body (James 4:14; Mark 6:13).

Through the Sacrament of marriage, the couple are united together, and the Holy spirit sets their home as the holy church of God...

Through the Sacrament of priesthood, Jesus Christ, the Unique Chief-Priest acts in those whom the Holy Spirit grants the grace of priesthood (Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1: 16).

These exceeding divine acts are the free grace of God offered to believers through His Church.

**2. The free divine actions for human sanctification:** These actions are called "Sacraments," for they are divine and they surpass the human mind. The believer acknowledges the Holy Trinity acting to his advantage, so that he may become son of God sanctified by the precious Blood. He participates with the heavenly creatures in their supreme life, and enjoy God's action in his conjugal life, and the divine providence in his sickness etc. These sacraments have an evangelic spirit, I mean they do not ignore the human side.

In more details, I say that God grants man special honor because of His love to him. Thus God acts by him and through him and does not ignore him. For example, no heavenly or earthy creatures has the power to grant a human being to be a child of God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism, according to the merits of the Cross, but it is performed by the priest. God appreciates giving man this honor, but the Sacrament is effectively God's work and not the priest's. Someone may ask, why does not God grant His gifts to the believer directly and not through the priest? we reply that when God the Son became man, He honored all mankind by acting through them, calling them, sanctifying them and granting them the grace of priesthood.

When God the Son was incarnate for our salvation, He took a true Body from Virgin Mary who had a positive role... We considered this as an honor to mankind. Likewise, God asks men to have a positive role, so that He may reveal Himself through men.

**3. Proclaiming the nature of the church:** Someone may misuse the sacraments, as sources of authority and not for serving others. This in turn may cause anger and protest against church authority. The Coptic Church however deals with the believers in a motherly way through these sacraments. The Holy Trinity grants gifts to the believer through His Church that has the image of Christ, and carry His likeness.

For example, the believer who receives rebirth in baptism, looks to the church as his mother who begot him by the Holy Spirit as a son of God. This gift of adoption unites him spiritually with other members so that he will not feel isolation nor live in individualism. In his conjugal life, a husband meets his wife as one with him through the loving church, looking at his relation with her as an image of the relation of Christ and the Church.

Practising the sacraments in spirit and truth without misusing authority proclaims the motherhood of the church, her unity, her spiritual existence and her message concerning the salvation of every soul, far away from the spirit of administration and human organization.

**4. Proclaiming our concept to the whole creation:** God the Word who surpassed all materials; became a true Man; who ate, drank, worked and sanctified our view, not only on **the body that He** took, but even on our daily life and the materials we use. We find no defilement in food, or look at the creation in enmity or as an element of darkness.

Using materials in sacraments, like water in Baptism, oil in the Holy Unction, bread and wine in the Eucharist, metal crown in baptism and marriage celebration, priests' vestments etc. grant us an honorable view on materials, for we see God's hand that sanctifies everything for our salvation.

**OUR CONCEPT OF CHURCH SACRAMENTS**

Sacraments are vital and essential to the believers; they are the means of practising the evangelic thoughts, besides receiving the grace of God and the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Christ, so that all believers-might be lifted up to the bosom of the Father.

**Here, I wish to explain in brief our concepts of every sacrament:**

1. In the Coptic rite of Baptism there are two essential lines; denying Satan and the acceptance of God's work. In other words, in baptism the believer is transferred from being belonged to Satan through subjection to his works, to receiving God's adoption, and being His. He denies the kingdom of the devil to receive within himself that of Christ, turning towards the east, where the sun of Righteousness shines, instead of the west, which is a symbol of darkness.

In this rite, the church deposits the newly baptized into the hands of a godparent giving him firm commandments, to be responsible of, and do his best to present the evangelic church life to the newly baptized.

The Coptic church insists that baptism is performed by immersion, except in necessary cases such as illness; whereas the baptized person is buried with Christ and also risen with Him to enjoy the new risen life (Rom. 6:4-6).

2. In the rite of Chrism, the body is anointed with holy oil thirtysix times, as a symbol of the sanctification of the soul and body together, so that man in his wholeness, becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. All members of the body-even those which are inferior-are anointed with the holy Chrism, for there is no defiled or shameful member of the body.

Putting on new white clothes (and also a crown in ancient), refers to enjoying the pledge of the crowned, pure and heavenly life.

3. In the rite of penance and confession, the priest and the confessor feel that they are together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which convicts men of sins, and forgives sins in order to obtain a communion with the Holy Trinity.

The believer does not feel ashamed of discovering his own weakness, in the presence of his spiritual father who takes care of his salvation, and who feels as if he was partaker with his sons of their weaknesses.

4. In the Eucharist, the church is lifted up to heaven, through the One unrepeated Sacrifice, the life giving and ever present One.

In this Sacrament, the ckurch prays for her children, for the whole world, for the salvation of mankind, and for their life on earth etc. For she appeals to God's heart that is tender with love, and His ears that hear her petitions.

5. In the Holy Unction, the petition for spiritual blessings are correlated to the temporal ones, so that the sick person may obtain remission of sins and healing of the soul and body.

6. In the sacrament of marriage, the rite is concentrated on revealing the heavenly crown, that the hearts of all who are present

may be lifted up to the heavenly marriage, and that the couple acknowledge that their conjugal life is a shadow of the church in heaven.

7. In the sacrament of priesthood, the person obtains this grace to wash the feet of God's people, not by himself, for he is unworthy of this ministry, but by Christ the Servant of mankind on behalf of their salvation. The priest receives "fatherhood" not by his own merit, but by the act of God's Fatherhood in him. He says with St. John: "My children" I John 2: 1, and with Paul the Apostle, "in Christ Jesus I have begotten you" I Cor. 4:15.

Hence the sacraments, in their rites seek for man's salvation and his receiving God's adoption, lift him up to the heavenly life to the bread of angels, that he may obtain participation in the eternal glories. Sacraments are the fulfillment of Gospel blessings.

**CHURCH TRADITION**

For a long time, some western writers looked to "tradition" as a blind obedience to the past, and stickfast to a passive solid deposit. In their point of view, tradition is a precise catalogue of a set of ancient doctrines, canons and rites, or it is a museum for antiquity. Therefore, the traditional church, in their view, seems to be a solid obscurant and retrograded one, attached to what is old, simply for its antiquity.

**THE MEANING OF "TRADITION"**

The word "tradition," in Greek, as it is mentioned in the New Testament, is "Paradosis," which does not mean "imitation," but "delivering a thing and receiving it, i.e., delivering a deposit of faith and receiving it along the generations (Jude 3).

**THE SUBJECT OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

1. The message of Faith in the Holy Trinity and God's redeeming

deeds.

2. The deeds and words of Christ.

3. The books of the Old Testament.

4. The spiritual and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ. 5. The curriculum of worship, its concept and order.

TRADITION IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

In the apostolic age, tradition was the only source of Christian faith, doctrines and worship. Its role in the Church life of that period may be summarized in the following points:

1. The Early Church received from Christ and the apostles a new understanding of the Old Testament, which the Jews did not acknowledge. She received the Old Testament with a new concept.

2. Through tradition, Christians accepted the books of the New Testament as the inspired word of God, before they were canonized

by the Church.

3. Tradition was the source of the Apostles' teaching (I John 1: 1; John 19:35, Luke 1:2; Acts 1:21,22). The Apostle Paul considered what he received from the Church through tradition as if received from the Lord Himself (Gal. 1: 7; 1 Cor. 11: 23).

4. By tradition, the church practised the active new life in Christ.

**TRADITION AND THE HOLY SCRIPTURES**

The Holy Scriptures in fact are a part of the Church tradition. The tradition in its essence is declaring the word of God by various methods. For tradition concentrated on the apostolic teaching. The appearance of the books of the New Testament did not cancel the tradition, but these books command us to preserve the tradition (2 John 12; 3 John 13:14; 1 Cor. 11:34; Titus 1:5; 2 Thes. 3:16; John 21:25; 2 Cor. 11:23).

TRADITION IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

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\* Origen says: "By tradition, I knew the four Gospels, and that they are true ones."

\* Church Tradition preserve the unity of understanding the Holy Scriptures throughout ages, so that no believer interprets them according to his own will. Origen states: "The true disciple of Jesus is He who enters the house, that is to say, the Church. He enters it thinking as the Church does, and living as she does; this is how he understands the word. The key of the Scriptures must be received from the tradition of the Church, as from the Lord Himself.

THE JEWISH TRADITION AND CHRISTIANITY

Christ rejected the literal Jewish tradition, which opposed the **word of God** (Matt. 15:3; Mark 7:13; Col 2:8). The early Church used to participate in the ministry of the Jewish temple with its hymns and Psalms. The Church accepted what was living and in accordance with the word of God. From the Jewish tradition St. Jude knew the dispute between Michael and the devil (Jude 9), and the prophecy of Enoch (Jude 14,15), and the apostle Paul knew the names of those who opposed Moses (2 Tim. 3:8), etc.

**THE PRESERVATION OF CHURCH TRADITION**

Church tradition in faith, worship, behavior and practical life was delivered to us through the decisions of the Ecumenical and local councils, the patristic writings and also through the practical life of laymen who played a vital role in delivering the spirit of the new life to us throughout generations.

**CHURCH TRADITION AND THE PRESENT LIFE**

\* Tradition does not mean "rigidity," but giving attention to the past as a basis for the present, and to the present as a basis for the future. Tradition is the mystery of church growth and vitality and not of rigidity.

\* We have to understand tradition in its spiritual depth and theological basis and not in holdingfast its literality without understanding.

\* When the Church of Alexandria preached to Ethiopia, she offered her the living Church tradition, but did not oblige the Ethiopians to accept the Coptic traditions in their details. We have to distinguish between tradition as a general Church thought and the traditions which concern the local churches. For example, Ethiopia accepted the tradition of using liturgies in her worship but did not use the same texts in their literality. She accepted the spirit and the general frame of the liturgies. Ethiopia also accepted tradition of venerating icons but she used her own art and not the Coptic one. Thus the Coptic church offered Ethiopia the essence of her tradition but not its details. Therefore if we preach to a foreign country, we

have to present the Orthodox Church Tradition without obliging them to accept a certain local thought. This is what happens today as the Coptic church preaches to Africa, and Kenya for example.

**THE CHURCH TRADITION AND PERSONAL LIFE**

Some believes that preserving the Church tradition means canceling the personality of every member of the Church in his relationship with God, his understanding the Holy Bible and in practising worship. The Orthodox Church believes in the moderate way without any exaggeration, for she holdsfast the church tradition that organizes the church life, clarifies the principal concepts of worship and reveals the spirit of the Holy Bible without canceling the personal relationship of every member of the church with his Savior. Besides his personal understanding of the Bible, and his enjoying freedom.

For example, in any society, social organization and family relationships or bonds furnish the personality of every member within the spirit of the community, but do not ignore his personality.

The Church of Europe in the middle ages used church orders and canons as rigid laws and got the believer's personal rights. While today the majority of the Western Christians believe in the individual freedom in understanding the Bible according to one's will, and to acknowledge Christianity individually. The Orthodox church in fact follows midway, i.e., sanctifies the church thoughts as a community and at the same time appreciates the personal life of every member of the Church.