**The Coptic Church and Worship Part II**

**A Worshipping Church**

The Coptic Church is known as being a worship-loving church. Her worship is rather incessant, her liturgies are rich with theology and rites, so profound and delightful. A child can participate with a cheerful heart. Her feasts are continuous every-day besides Sundays, the weekly feasts, the monthly and the yearly feasts. Its songs are diversified and enjoyable. With her calm, meek and effective spirit she is capable of reaching deep into the soul and she shakes the heart and emotions in credit of the Kingdom of God. Her joy is mixed with asceticism and her fasting exceeds half of the year.

Worship in the church represents a living part of the ecclesiastical life which reacts together with the enjoyment of the Holy Bible, doctrine faith, ascetic life and her sacred outlook to man and his entity. All that collaborates to lead to "life in Christ".

This devotional life is not exclusive for the priests and monks, but it is for every member of the church. Everybody participates in worship and performs through organized church services without confusion. They worship collectively not individually, in spirituality and gentleness and not in the rigid deadly letter. The spirit of public worship can be practiced by the believer even in his bedroom, because he practices his personal worship as a member of the community, who thanks, praises, and asks in the name of the whole, as all are in the depth of his heart.

**The Holy Bible and
Church Worship**

The Holy Bible and The Alexandrine Church

Since her inception, especially starting from the second century, the Alexandrine Church has been known for her School which concentrated on the study of the Holy Bible and was interested in its allegorical interpretation. This method of interpretation was received by Origen from his teacher, St. Clement, and from his predecessors. Origen had put its principals and bases and explored its aim, to the extent that the allegorical interpretation of the Bible all over the world is owed to him. Origen exaggerated in using this method but he had left many disciples, directly or through his writings, among church leaders, and his influence remained clear even over his opponents.

I do not intend here to enumerate Oirgen's fault's because they have been exposed before, but I wish to elucidate the role of the Holy Bible in the Alexandrine Church and her School, particularly as related to church worship.

1. The School of Alexandria paid attention to science and philosophy, and therefore did not show any hostility towards philosophers, on the contrary, for some of the churchmen were students in the philosophical School "the Museum" and they attracted many of its leaders--the philosophers--to Christianity. Yet at the same time the School of Alexandria did not look to the Holy bible with a philosophical view for mere satisfaction of the mind, or for the sake of arguments and debates. She looked at the Bible as the experience of meeting with the Word of God and a true enjoyment of the Holy Trinity's work in the life of the community and in the life of each member therein. According to the Alexandrine thought the soul enters - through the spirit of prayer and piety - into the presence of God that He might raise her above the deadly literal meaning, ascends her to His heavenly chamber, and reveals to her His divine mysteries which cannot be expressed in human language. Thus the Holy bible in its essence is a discovery of the incarnate Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is hidden behind its words, who leads us to experience the communion with the Father through Him, by the Holy Spirit. In other words, studying and meditating on the Holy Bible is a spiritual worship and an enjoyment with the Holy Trinity, as we experience our sonship to the Father and His Fatherhood to us, our steadfastness in the Only Begotten Son and the attainment of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.
2. The Holy bible is considered as an encounter with God and an interaction with Him in a spirit of worship and piety, so worship, common or private, is an expression of the flowing love from hearts which have encountered God and yearned to enter into new depth in order to stay with Him, in His bosom, forever enjoying His mysteries and glories. In other words, worship is also an enjoyment of the evangelic life, understanding the Holy bible and a discovery of the words' secrets.
Here we acknowledge church life which is inflamed with love, as one integral life, containing on one hand the spirit of studying the Holy Bible. Worship is a practical entrance to the Gospel, and the study of the Bible is a true experience of worshipping. Every worship outside the Bible is fruitless, and every Bible study without the spirit of worship distorts the soul.
Therefore, it is needless to say that church worship - common and private - is correlated to the Bible, not only because it includes excerpts from the scriptures, but also because it carries the spirit of the Bible, every breath of love to God through our worship. Worship is inspired by the spirit of the Bible and at the same time the Bible reveals the spirit of worship and the depth of its mysteries on a heavenly level.
3. All church liturgies, common, family, and private worship include readings from the Old and New Testaments, particularly from the Book of Psalms, the Epistles of St. Paul, the Catholic Epistles, and from the four Gospels. Such readings are included in the liturgy of catechumens, the liturgy of blessing the water, the celebration of Holy matrimony, blessing the baptismal water, funeral services, for blessing new homes as well as at the daily Canonical Hour. Thus the church offers thanksgiving to her God in every occasion in a spirit of worship through reciting verses of the Holy Bible, and at the same time she urges her children to sit with God's word, enjoy and meditate on it.
4. Church life is not only a life of worship in an evangelic way or a biblical life in a spirit of worship, but it is one, inclusive and integral life, which includes the practical daily life with good behavior, the ascetic practice and the desire of the heart to witnessing and preaching. In other words, our Bible study is worship, practical behavior, asceticism and preaching. Truly some members may be gifted in depth with certain talents. For example, some my be involved in studying the Bible, others in practicing asceticism, and others in preaching etc… Yet all members have to live in the one whole spirit in order not to deviate from the aim of the bible and the spirit of the church.
5. Moreover, the Alexandrine Church recognized that the mystery of the Scriptures is uncovered through three essential and related matters:
6. Study and research: Origen collected the texts and translations of the Bible and arranged them in six columns (Hexapala). If a verse is obscure, the scholar may refer to other texts to elucidate it. Thus Origen from the second century - was ahead of his time.
7. Prayers and pious life: The Alexandrine students were men of prayer and asceticism. They believed in the need of the Divine Revelation to the soul through purity in Christ to understand the Bible.
8. Discipleship: The scholar cannot fully enjoy the biblical spirit through his own individual private studies. In order to deviate, he needs to be disciple of a spiritual father to attain the delivered biblical though, besides the need of being disciple of the Early Fathers through their writings.

**THE LITURGICAL WORSHIP
IN THE COPTIC CHURCH**

THE WORD "LITURGY"

THE WORD "LITURGY"

The word "Liturgy" in classic Greek means "a public service undertaken on behalf of the people" it comes from:

1. "Liaw," meaning "People."
2. "Ergia," meaning "work."

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, this word means "the service of the altar," or "the priestly service" Heb. 8:6; 9:21.

The church used this term since the apostolic age, to cover all that worship which is officially organized by her, and which is offered by all her members, or on their behalf. In the course of time, this term has come to be particularly applied to the performance of the service of Eucharist, although there are other liturgies as the liturgy of Baptism, liturgy of marriage etc.

LITURGICAL WORSHIP AND LITURGICAL LIFE

Liturgy does not mean some hours spent by believers - clergymen and laity - in participating in the Eucharistic liturgy, performing on vesper or matin or baptism or marriage celebrations etc., but it is in its essence the true communion with Christ. This liturgical life is not lived only when a believer participates in common worship whatever it is, but it dwells within his heart even when he is alone in his room. In other words "liturgy" is a life which the church practices, through which she acknowledges her nature, realizes her message and attains her own existence which is life and growth in Jesus Christ.

In fact, we use the word "liturgy" for common worship, because the believer participates in this worship with the members of the community. This membership is alive and active and it represents a part of his entity. He is a member even when he is alone speaking with God in his own room. The holy community is in the heart of the real believer, and the believer is within the heart of the church community. In other words, when a believer prays in his room, he realizes that all the church is within his heart, praying in her name, calling God: "Our Father" and not my Father who art in heaven." At the same time, when the community prays it endows its members, present and absent with love.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COPTIC LITURGIES

1. The Coptic liturgies are known to be not monopolized by clergymen. They are the liturgies of all the church, laymen and clergymen. The people participate in the hymns, and prayers. Therefore clergymen should pray in the language of the people, clearly and with a pleasant tone, as the people take their turn in participating. Here the "people" means all the congregation: men, women and children. The Coptic Church does not exclude children during the liturgy, and this is one of the resources of our church in Egypt, for even the child feels his positive membership and acknowledges his right in participating in church liturgies. The beautiful rites and heavenly hymns encourage children in worship without feeling bored, In spite of the lengthy services.

2. The Coptic liturgies not only emphasize church unity, clergy and laity, young and old, men and women, but also aim at revealing that the heavenly life is near and realizable to us! All the Coptic liturgies have eschatological (heavenly) attitude. In the liturgies the church participates in the hymns of the heavenly creatures, its thoughts are attracted to acknowledge the hidden mysteries of heaven. For example, the liturgy of marriage attracts our thoughts to the heavenly marriage of our souls to Christ, and also to the crowns of the saints.

3. The Coptic liturgies are correlated to the church dogmas and doctrines. Liturgies' rites and texts instruct even children in simple ways about Church faith, her concepts and dogmas concerning:

God; our relation with Him; our relation with the heavenly hosts and saints; our view of sanctity, of the world and our bodies, our struggles against the devil and his agent etc. Liturgies represent a school to the people, opening its doors to the children through its simplicity, and to the theologians through its depth.

Coptic liturgies clarify church dogmas without the need of any theological discussions, and at the same time gives genuine theological concepts that believers experience during their worship.

4. Coptic liturgies are correlated to the ascetic church life. Asceticism has its effect on our liturgies, as it appears in the long duration of the services and practicing kneeling during the services. Liturgies soothe and delight the ascetic person. For example, in the service of the Holy Week and Good Friday, although the believers fast for long periods and abstain from many kinds of food, they feel true consolation, which they rarely attain in other occasions during the year. The daily Eucharistic liturgies in Lent season grant the believers spiritual delight of particular character.

5. Coptic liturgies are biblical. Every liturgy declares the word of God and the experience of the evangelic life. They include readings from the Holy Bible, the Old and New Testaments, especially the book of Psalms, Epistles of St. Paul, the Catholic Epistles, and the Gospels. They also present prayers and hymns quoted from the Bible, carrying evangelic thoughts. Thus we can say that liturgies are totally presented in the spirit of the Bible.

6. Coptic liturgies touch the believers' daily life and also their family life, for they are the "dynamic energy" which moves their lives. There is no separation between common worship and actual life. In other words, believers practice the common worship as a part of their lives as a whole.

To explain the correlation between the liturgical life of common worship and the daily life for Copts, we here give some examples:

a. The priest and the laity acknowledge the liturgy of Eucharist as a meeting at the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as an entrance to Golgotha, so that they all might sit under the Cross' shadow (Cant. 2:3). The priest puts his hand on the "Lamb" (Holy Bread) and prays for his family, his spiritual children and for all the people. He prays for the repentance of those who stray away and for the solution to church problems and family disputes, and for those who are in trouble that God may intervene through His Divine grace. He also prays for those who are traveling, for the sick and for those who departed in the Lord etc.

The Coptic people used to ask the priest to remember them and their problems on the attar of the Lord and they themselves participate with him in asking God. Thus, Copts find their comfort in the liturgy -of the Eucharist, as they find the precious Blood of Jesus Christ as the propitiation of their sins (I John 4: 10), and a source of their inner peace.

b. Through the various liturgies believers acknowledge the motherhood of the church and the fatherhood of the priest as a figure and shadow of God's Fatherhood. Therefore, Copts flee to the church as their own refuge in the important and trifle matters, in sadness and in their happiness, because of their trust in her and their love for her. For Example, when God grants a family a baby, the church prays a special "liturgy" for washing the babe on the eighth day of his birth. The priest, deacons, the family and their friends participate in giving thanks and praise to God, asking Him to act in the baby that he might grow in the &race of God as a saintly member of the church. When a person succeeds in any work usually he asks for giving thanks to God by praying a special doxology through or after the Eucharistic liturgy. When a person falls ill he asks for praying the liturgy of the unction. When a person dies the church prays the funeral service, on the third day prays a common prayer at his house to declare God's consolation through the resurrection of Christ on the third day, and in every memory the priest mentions the name of the dead person in Eucharistic liturgy (the diptych).

Thus, the church does not interfere in the lives of her children but through love, participates in all their affairs, that they might feel her motherhood and her sharing in their feelings.

**THE COPTIC** **FEASTS**

**FEASTS AND WORSHIP**

Moses' Law arranged seven major feasts (lev. 23), which had their rites and sanctity, as a living part of the common worship. These feasts are: the Sabbath or Saturday of every week, the first day of every month, the Seventh Year, the Year of Jubilee, the Passover (Pasch), the feast of the weeks (Pentecost), the feast of Tabernacles (feast of Harvest). After the Babylonian exile two feasts were added, i.e., the feast of Purim and the Feast of Dedication. The aim of these feasts was to revive the spirit of joy and gladness in the believers' lives and to consecrate certain days for the common worship in a holy convocation (assembly) (Exod 12:16; Lev. 23); and to remember God's promises and actions with His people to renew the covenant with Him on both common and personal levels. The feasts were a way leading to enjoy Christ, the continuous "Feast" and the Source of eternal joy.

When the Word of God was incarnate and became man, He submitted to the Law and attended and celebrated the feasts. However, He diverted the attention from the symbol to reality, and from the outward appearances to the inner depths (John 2, 5, 6, 7, 12); to grant the joy of the feast through practicing the secret communion with God and receiving His redeeming deeds.

Almost all the days are feasts to the Coptic Church. Although she is known for bearing the cross, she is eager to have her children live, in the midst of sufferings in spiritual gladness. She is capable, by the Lord's help, to raise them above tribulations. In other words, the Coptic Church is continuously suffering and joyful at the same time, her feasts are uninterrupted, and her hymns with a variety of melodies are unceasing.

**A CHURCH OF JOY**

One of the main characteristics of the Coptic Church is "joy," even in her ascetic life. St. John Cassian described the Egyptian monks who spread from Alexandria to the southern borders of Thabied (Aswan) saying that the voice of praise came out perpetually from the monasteries and caves, as if the whole land of Egypt became a delightful paradise. He called the Egyptian monks heavenly terrestrials or terrestrial angles.

St. Jerome informs us about an abbot called Apollo who was always smiling. He attracted many to the ascetic life as a source of inward joy and heartfelt satisfaction in our Lord Jesus. He often used to say: "Why do we struggle with an unpleasant face?! Aren't we the heirs of the eternal life?! Leave the unpleasant and the grieved faces to pagans, and weeping to the evil-doers. But it befits the righteous and the saints to be joyful and pleasant since they enjoy the spiritual gifts."

This attitude is reflected upon church worship, her arts and all her aspects of life, so that it seems that the church life is a continuous unceasing feast. Pope Athanasius the Apostolic tells us in a paschal letter that "Christ" is our feast. Although there are perpetual feasts the believer discovers that his feast is in his innermost, i.e., in the dwelling of Christ the life-giving Lord in him.

The church relates and joins the feasts to the ascetic life. The believers practice fasting, sometimes for almost two months (Great Lent) in preparation for the feast, in order to realize that their joy is based on their communion with God and not on the matter of eating, drinking and new clothes.

The Coptic feasts have deep and sweet hymns, and splendid rites that inflame the spirit. Their aim is to offer the living heavenly and evangelic thought and to expose the Holy Trinity and Their redeeming work in the life of the church, in a way that is simple enough to be experienced by children, and: deep enough to quench the thirst of theologians.

**FEASTS OF THE COPTIC CHURCH**

**1. THE SEVEN** **MAJOR FEASTS OF OUR LORD**

**a. The Annunciation** (Baramhat 29, c. April 7): In it we recall the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, and the attainment which the men of God had longed for across the ages, namely the coming of the Word of God incarnated in the Virgin's womb (Matt. 13:17).

**b. The Nativity of Christ (Christmas)** on Kayhk 29, c. January 7: It is preceded by a fast of 43 days. Its aim is to confirm the divine love, when God sent His Only - begotten Son incarnate. Thus, He restored to humanity her honor, and sanctified our daily life, offering His life as a Sacrifice on our behalf

**c. The Epiphany or the Baptism of Christ** on Tobah 11, c. January 19: It is connected with Christmas and the circumcision feasts. For on Christmas, the Word of God took what is ours (our humanity) and in the "circumcision" He subjected Himself to the Law as He became one of us, but in the Epiphany He offered us what is His own. By His incarnation He became a true man while He still being the Only-begotten Son of God, and by baptism we became children of God in Him while we are human being

In this feast, the liturgy of blessing the water is conducted, and the priest blesses the people by the water on their foreheads and hands to commemorate baptism

**d. Palm Sunday:** It is the Sunday which precedes Easter. It has its characteristic joyful hymns (the Shannon - Hosanna (Matt. 21:9), and its delightful rite. The church commemorates the entrance of our Lord Jesus into our inward Jerusalem to establish His Kingdom in us and gather all in Him. Therefore a delighful is procession or the redeemed believers, starts -God's plan for Christ's self-oblation. The procession moves towards the nave of the church were it stands before the icons of St. Mary, the Archangels, St. John the Baptist, the Apostles, the marthe ascetics etc... and before the church doors and the baptismal basin, praising God who embraces all together in His Son Jesus Christ. The procession ends by re-entering the sanctuary, for the of God of the Old and New testaments meet with the heavenly in heaven (sanctuary) forever.

The end of the liturgy of Eucharist, a general funeral service is held over water, which is sprinkled on behalf of anyone who may die during the Holy week, since the regular funeral prayers are not conducted during this week. By this rite, the church stresses on her pre-occupation with the passion and crucifixion of Christ only. She itrates on the marvelous events of this unique week with its glorious readings and rites which concern our salvation.

**e. Easter (The Christian Pascha or Passover):** It is preceded by Great Lent (55 days) and is considered by the Coptic Church as the Feast." Its delight continues for fifty days until the Pentecost. Easter is also essentially celebrated on every Sunday by participating A sacrament of the Eucharist. For the church wishes that all believers may enjoy the new risen life in Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:4).

**f. Ascension:** It is celebrated on the fortieth day after Easter Is on a Thursday. In this feast we recall Him who raises and lifts us up to sit with Him in heaven (Eph. 2:6).

**g. Pentecost:** It represents the birthday of the Christian Church. Only-begotten Son paid the price for her salvation, He ascended heaven to prepare a place for her. He sent His Holy Spirit in her, offering her existence, guidance, sanctification and adornment as the Heavenly Bride.

In this feast, the church chants hymns, being joyful with the resurrection of Christ, His ascension and the dwelling of His Holy Spirit in her, thus she connects the three feasts in one whole unity.

On this day, the church conducts three sets of prayers, called "Kneeling," during which incense and prayers are offered on behalf of the sick, the travelers, the winds, and it gives special attention to the dormant, as a sign of her enjoying the communion and unity with Christ that challenges even death.

**2.THE SEVEN** **MINOR FEASTS OF OUR LORD**

**a. The Circumcision of our Lord:** It is celebrated on the eighth day after Christmas (Tobah 6, c. 14 January), by which we remember that the Word of God who gave us the Law, He Himself was subjected to this Law, fulfilling it, to grant us the power to fulfill the Law in a spiritual manner. Thus we enjoy the circumcision of spirit and that of heart (Col. 2:11), instead of the literal circumcision of the flesh.

**b. The Entrance of our Lord into the Temple** (Amshir 8, c. February 15): We remember that the Word of God became man and does not want us to be careless about our lives, but to set our goals early since childhood. Thus we have to work and fulfill our goals regardless of people related to us, in spite of our love and obedience to them (Luke 2:24).

**c. The Escape of the Holy family to Egypt** (Bashans 24, c. June 1): The Coptic Church is distinguished among all nations with this unique divine work, by the coming of our Lord to Egypt among the Gentiles.

**d. The First Miracle of our Lord Jesus at Cana** (Tobah 13, c. January 12): Our Lord changed the water into wine, as His first miracle, at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, confirming His eagerness for our attaining the heavenly wedding, and granting us the wine of His exceeding love.

**e.** **The Transfiguration of Christ** (Musra 13; c. August 19): The unity of the two testaments was manifested in this feast, for Moses and Elijah assembled together with Peter, James and John. The glory of our Lord was revealed to satisfy every soul who rises up with Him to the mountain of Tabor to enjoy the brightness of His Glory.

**f. Maundy Thursday:** This is the Thursday of the Holy week. In it we commemorate the establishment of the Sacrament of Eucharist by our Lord Jesus, when He offered His Body and Blood as the living and effective Sacrifice, capable of sanctifying our hearts, granting us the victorious and eternal life.

This is the only day of the Holy Week in which Sacrifice of the Eucharist is offered, and the rite of washing the feet is practised in commemoration of what Christ did for His disciples.

On this day also an unusual procession takes place, starting from the south of the church nave, during which a hymn of rebuking Jude the betrayal is chanted as a warning to us not to fall like him.

**g. Thomas's Sunday:** This is the Sunday that follows Easter; In it we bless those who believe without seeing so that all might live in faith through the internal touch of the Savior's wounds (John 20:29).

**3. THE MONTHLY FEASTS**

The believers joyfully celebrate the commemoration of the Annunciation, Nativity and Resurrection of Christ on the 29th of every Coptic month, the commemoration of St. Mary on the 21st and the feast of Archangel Michael on the 12th.

**4. THE WEEKLY FEAST**

Every Sunday stands as a true Sabbath (rest), in which we find our rest in the resurrection of Christ. There is no abstention from food on Sundays after the celebration of the Eucharist, even during Great Lent.

**5. FEASTS OF THE SAINTS**

There is almost a daily feast, so that the believers may live in perpetual joy and in communion with the saints. In addition there are other special fasts and occasions:

**a. The Feasts of St. Mary:** The Coptic Church venerates St. Mary as the "Theotokos," i.e., the Mother of God, whom the Divine Grace chose to bear the Word of God in her womb by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Since she is considered to be the exemplary member in the church, and the interceding mother on behalf of her spiritual children, she is exalted above heavenly and earthly creatures. Therefore, the church does not cease glorifying (blessing) her, and celebrating her feasts in order that we imitate her and ask her intercessions on our behalf Her main feasts are:

The annunciation of her birth (Misra 7, c. August 13);

Her Nativity (Paschans 1, c. May 9);

Her Presentation into the Temple (Kyahk 3, c. December 12);

Her Dormition (Tobah 2 1, c. January 29);

The Assumption of her body (Paoni 21, c. June 28);

Her apparition over the Church of Zeitoon (Baramhat 24, c. April 2);

And the apparition of her body to the Apostles (Mesra 16, c. August 22).

**b. The Apostles' F**east (Abib 5, c. July 12): This is the feast of martyrdom of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. It is preceded by a fasting period which starts on the day following the Pentecost. In this feast, the liturgy of blessing the water takes place, in which the priest washes the feet of his people (men and children) commemorating what the Lord did for His disciples. Thus, the priest remembers that he is a servant who washes the feet of the people of God and not a man of authority.

**c. The Nayrouz Feast** (1st of Tout, c. September 11): The word "Nayrouz" is Persian, meaning "the beginning of the year." The Egyptian calendar goes back to 4240 B.C. Copts restored the calendar with the beginning of Diocletian's reign in AD 284, to commemorate the millions of Coptic martyrs. His reign is considered a golden era in which the church offered true witnesses to Christ, when the souls of martyrs departed to paradise and kept shining as living stars therein.

This feast, with its joyful hymns, continues until the feast of the Cross (Tout 17, c. 27 September). Thus the church announces her joy and gladness with the martyrs through bearing the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the sufferings and martyrdom were turned into a source of joy.

**d. The Two Feasts of the Cross:** The first feast is on Tout 17, (c. September 27). It commemorates the dedication of the Church of the Holy Cross which was built by Queen Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine. The second feast, is on Barmahat 10 (c. March 19) and commemorates the discovery of the Holy Cross on the hands of the same empress in A.D 326.

During these two feasts the church conducts a procession similar to that of Palm-Sunday and uses the same tone in chanting (Shannon-Hosanna), to announce that the cause of her joy with the Cross is the openness of the hearts (the inner Jerusalem) to receive the Savior as the King who reigns within us.

**THE COPTIC CHURCH AND**

**THE SPIRITUALITY OF RITE**

**THE RITE OF HEAVEN**

God is Spirit, and His heavenly Creatures are spirits without bodies. Nevertheless, the book of Revelation tells us about a rite of heaven; for it has specific hymns (Rev. 4:8) and certain worship (Rev. 4: 10); there we find the 24 incorporeal priests with golden crowns on their heads and hold golden censers (Rev. 4:4). St. John also describes the heavenly Jerusalem, its gates, foundation, walls and temple etc.. (Rev. 21). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Alexandrian Church established her rites since her conception.

**A RITUAL CHURCH**

The holy Scriptures emphasize that our God is "not the author of confusion" I Con 14:33, hence He establishes His heavens with splendid spiritual rites. The church of the Old Testament carried out a rite which was "the copy and shadow of the heavenly things" Heb. 8:5. The word of God dedicated some books of the Old Testament to declare in detail and exactitude the rites of priesthood, sacrifices, the structure of tabernacle and its tools, and rites of worship. For God wants "all things to be done decently and in order I Cor. 14:40.

It is not in vain that the Lord in the New Testament when He was about to feed the multitude, said to His disciples: "Make them sit down in groups of fifty" Luke 9:14. He rather emphasized the necessity of order to grant His heavenly gifts. The Lord did not take a hostile stand towards the Jewish rite, but He subjected Himself to the Law with its rites; He was circumcised and entered the Temple to transfer the Jews to the spiritual rite with its heavenly concept.

However, He criticized the literality and the formality of rite. The disciples also followed their Lord's footsteps and attended the daily temple worship (Acts 3:46), besides their meeting together to break the bread without attacking the Jewish rite. They sought its completion through announcing the mystery of the cross and the sacrifice of Christ. When they were dismissed from the temple and from the Jewish synagogues as individuals and groups, the church did not live without rite or order. On the contrary, the apostles emphasized the necessity of "order" and "decency" to the Church of God (I Cor. 14:40, 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6), declaring that orders and rites were handed out orally (I Cor. 11:34; Tit 1:5; 2 John 12:14).

**THE AIM OF THE COPTIC RITES AND CHARACTERISTICS**

The Coptic rite is not an aim in itself, that the Church practices it literally without understanding. It is rather the Church's language, uttered by the holy congregation as a whole, and by every member, that they may enjoy the pledge of heaven through the rites. Therefore, St. Clement of Alexandria states that the church is the icon of heaven.

1. Any rite in which the believer does not practice his communion with God the Father, in His Son by the Holy Spirit and has not the experience of the joyful evangelic life as a heavenly one, is strange to the Coptic Church. For example, the rite of the sacrament of holy matrimony in its prayers concentrates on the heavenly crown and the spiritual marriage between God and His saints. This can be understood if the couple practice this sacrament spiritually and comprehend that this marriage is an image of the greatest mystery: the Union of Christ with His Church (Eph. 5:32).

2. The rite has its educational role, since the Coptic Church presents all the Christian dogmas, the concepts of faith, and the spiritual thoughts in very simple style. The child understands it, the theologian is satisfied with it, the priest who is burdened with pastoral work finds his comfort in it, and the spiritual ascetic finds it very nourishing to his soul. For example by making the sign of the cross children acknowledge the Trinitarian dogma and the divine incarnation, and through venerating icons they understand the extension of the church as the body of Christ.

3. The Coptic rites is characterized by harmony and oneness of spirit. Thus the church building with its splendid rite is in accord with the liturgical rites so that believers live under the guidance of the Spirit of God in a joyful pious life.

4. In the Coptic rite, the body shares with the soul in worshipping God, whether in congregational, familial or private worship. It is a sign of Church belief in unity of the human being as a whole without ignoring the role of the body in the spiritual life. In other words the church emphasizes the sanctity of the soul and the body together through the Holy Spirit of God.

The Coptic rite which contains hymns, standing piously for praying, stretching hands, kneeling, offering incense etc. does not present restricted bodily movements, but it represents a support of the body for the alert soul. In a similar way, every evil bodily action is capable of destroying the soul and hindering her union with God.

The rite is the language of man as a whole, which uses all man's capabilities to express his innermost which common language can't realize. Rite is an expression, which comes out of the body interacting with the depths of the inner soul.

5. In the Coptic rite not only the whole body participates in worshipping God, but also the creation shares in glorifying the Creator. In other words, the believer, realizing the sanctity of the creation, appears before God offering incense, wood (icons), bread, wine etc. to God, declaring that all creation glorifies God. This concept is in accordance with the words of the "Psalmody": [Praise the Lord from the earth... fire, hail, snow, clouds etc. (Ps. 148)]. Thus the inanimate creatures are not evil, nor do they hinder worship, but are good tools, which the believer can use them to express the sanctity of all creatures.

6. We may state that rite is an integral part of Church life. It touches our worship, our faith, our spirituality and our asceticism, if it is practiced spiritually and with understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If it is practiced as a duty or routine work, performed literally without understanding, it becomes an obstacle to the evangelic spiritual life. In other words, the rite is not mere order, an outer organization, or sets of laws that rule church life, but it is in its essence a living spirit we have received throughout the ages. The rite has its body, i.e., the visible order, and has also its spirit, i.e., the innermost thought. Whoever accepts the body of the rite without the spirit becomes a corpse, a burden, which should be buried. If we accept the body with the spirit we enjoy a life which has its effect on the congregation and on every individual.