

THE DIVINE LITURGY OR THE EUCHARIST 1993

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PART 1

I previously wrote Christ in the Eucharist with an evangelic, ecclesiastic, and patristic emphasis. I have since felt the need for a more concise book about the Divine Liturgy that is specifically directed to the general public. This is what prompted me to write this series which is based on an introductory study of the subject that took place after vespers at St. Peter and St. Paul Church in Santa Monica, answering some common questions and using my previous book, Christ in the Eucharist, to a large extent.

Father Tadros Yacoub Malaty

THE DIVINE LITURGY IS EVANGELIC LIFE

Our gospel is not just a collection of theoretical beliefs or teachings that we adopted, and it is not philosophical thinking that appeases the mind and leads us to argumentative discussions. It is first, and above of all, a way of life. We live our beliefs, and experience the new life that comes to us by our union with God, our Father, in His Son through the Holy Spirit. Paul, the apostle, said: "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but **also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance**" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

"You are our epistle written in our hearts, known **and read by all men**" (2 Corinthians 3:2). We live this evangelic life, which Christ gives us through His crucifixion, in our inner thoughts and desires, our family life, our work, and even during our sleep; we live it in both individual and church worship. We experience the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in us, enjoying the work of the gospel in great assurance such that the Lord Christ is transfigured in us, even in our dreams.

The Divine Liturgy took precedence in the heart and worship of the early church, because its celebration with the participation of the people is the undying practice of evangelic life.

How does the believer view the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist)?

Celebration of the Eucharist is enjoyment of evangelic life:

In it we offer God **unique worship** through our union with the Lord Christ who reveals to us His knowledge of the Father, so that we may also know Him, love Him, and unite with Him!

In it we shed the deeds of our old human nature - ungratefulness - and **attain the thankful nature of Christ** so that we can thank and praise with all our soul.

In it we **acquire the Savior Himself** so that we enjoy His glory and realize our salvation by Him and in Him.

In it we **renew our covenant with God** which sealed by the Blood that was sacrificed on the cross.

In it we rejoice in the **spiritual feast of Passover** which takes us from our land to His Heaven.

In it we **practice ecclesiastic life** as a life resurrected in Christ and through which we enjoy union with Him and fellowship with those in Heaven.

Lastly, in it we **celebrate the wondrous Sabbath**, the true day of the Lord where there is inner rest amidst the pains of this world.

THE DIVINE LITURGY AND WORSHIP

God asks us to worship Him, not because of a need for prayers, praise or fasts, but first and foremost He wants us to know Him as a lover of mankind and to be attached to Him as a personal Savior to man. St. Augustine said "to know Him, so I love Him, so I unite with Him ... "; we add "to be glorified with Him." This is the essence of our worship, to know Him so we can love Him, throw ourselves in His embrace, and be in His glory. In this way, we bear His likeness and become a living icon of Him.

The road to the Kingdom **begins with knowing God and ends with eternal glory when our knowledge of God becomes relatively complete.**

This is God's assurance when he said: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6, Septuagint). He wants us to bear His likeness - "love" - which we can not enjoy without knowing Him and accepting communion with Him. The sacrament of Baptism is called "illumination"¹, and is where we get to know the Holy Trinity. Through it, our inner vision is opened to see ourselves with our Christ in the heavenly Jordan. We become children of God, enjoying the kind fatherhood of the Father, the salvation of His Only-Begotten Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit which reshapes our inner human nature so that we bear the icon of Christ, in preparation for the eternal heavenly wedding. This is how Baptism prepares us for the mystery of the Eucharist, or participation in the Divine Liturgy, when we enter the Holy Place to see the Great High Priest, our God Jesus Christ, carrying us to His cross and leading us to His throne of blessing, and we participate in heavenly worship at a wondrous angelic level.

Our Christ carries us as members of His Body to His throne, so that we may know Him and He gives us His unique knowledge of the Father, to fulfill His words: "Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27).

As we participate in the Divine Liturgy, we are reconciled with the Father by being worthy of His Son's Blood; thus our eyes are opened to comprehend His supreme fatherly love.
We praise You, Whom the Word ... knows You and **reveals You to the Saints.**²

Euchologium of Serapion

Thus in the Divine Liturgy as we acknowledge the Son and He acknowledges us, and we receive His knowledge of the Father, **knowledge of our union with Him**; it is not a purely theoretical or intellectual knowledge. We acquire knowledge of the Father's love; the Father who offered us His son in a sacrifice of love for our salvation.

In the Divine Liturgy, we also find the Holy Word offering His life as **a sacrifice of complete obedience** to the Father and **a sacrifice of genuine love** towards all the world, for in this sacrifice, the Lord Christ offered a unique worship because He Himself deserves every worship and adoration. It is worship that no heavenly creature or anyone on earth can offer. This is the

sacrifice which the Lord Christ gave His church the right to offer; the church offers the sacrament of the Eucharist as Christ's sacrifice, that which cannot not be duplicated, so that God sees us offering the sacrifice of the holy cross, bearing Christ's worship, love, obedience, and His life and holiness.

As we too commemorate His Holy Passion, His Resurrection ...

We offer You Your oblations from what is Yours.³

Liturgy of St. Basil

As St. Irenaeus said: "for we offer to Him His own, announcing constantly the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit."⁴

THE DIVINE LITURGY AND THE THANKFUL NATURE

After the fall of man, we acquired an ungrateful nature, not only towards God the Creator, but also towards our parents and those that flooded us with gifts! We became in need of a complete renewal of our nature so that we may bear a thankful and loving nature instead of ungratefulness and hatred.

When we participate in the Eucharist, we are led to the cross and our vision is elevated to our Christ, the fountainhead of love, so we sing "I sat down in His shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me was love." (Song of Solomon 2:3, 4).

What is this fruit that gives us sweetness and delight other than the Body and Blood of the Lord in Which we acknowledge Him and He acknowledges us. Let us not be preoccupied with the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which the first Adam ate, but with the fruit of divine love which the Second Adam gives us.

Christ's Blood flows in our veins so that we can bear his thankful nature. He sheds our ungrateful spirit from us, and our souls rejoice as those in heaven, not knowing what to offer God, our Savior, other than prayers of thanks and gratitude.

The invitation is for everyone - priests and laity, young and old - to participate in the Divine Liturgy and enter the open doors of heaven to practice a thankful, joyful, heavenly life! Hence the Divine Liturgy is called the Eucharist or the Sacrament of Thanksgiving.

It was said "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (Jeremiah 13:23). We ask Jesus Christ to change our skin and our nature. We bear Him and commune with Him so that He may change our rebellious and ungrateful nature into a joyful and thankful one.

THE DIVINE LITURGY AND SALVATION

What could be meant by salvation other than receiving the Savior Himself?! The salvation He gives us is not meant to just forgive our sins, but so that we gain possession of Him and enjoy the events in His life, as if they were our own: His birth from a virgin, His baptism in the Jordan, His suffering, His crucifixion, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension to heaven - I see all these events as taking place in my name and for my sake. Through Him I gain a new birth, I suffer and am crucified for the world, I die for sin, and then I am resurrected and sit with Him in heaven (Ephesians 2:6).

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, I gain the Savior with all the stages of His life, as if my own; Jeremiah said "My claim is my God, said my soul." I acquired Him crucified on the cross, resurrected from death, and sitting on the right side of His Father. Strangely, He established this sacrament before the events of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, confirming that His salvation is not bound by time. His sacrifice transcends time, for His disciples received His glorious, resurrected Body even before the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. The church receives Him even now assuring us that His unique sacrifice is timeless - He is still in heaven as a sacrificial lamb Who intercedes for His church through His Blood on the cross (Revelation 5:6).

Thus the Divine Liturgy is unique because Christ's sacrifice is unlike the animal sacrifices which ended with the offering. Our sacrificed Christ arises alive in the midst of His church, working with His cross, and capable of changing our nature! As **St. John Chrysostom** ("golden-mouthed") said "When you see It set before you, say to yourself: because of His Body I am no longer earth and ashes, no longer a prisoner but I am free. Because of this (Body) I hope for heaven, and to receive the good things therein, immortal life, the portion of angels and converse with Christ"!5

The Divine Liturgy is in fact a sacrament of matrimony for the soul with Christ in preparation for the eternal marriage. In this marriage, there is a mutual partnership - we own Him and He owns us. He takes what is ours so that we may take what is His.

THE DIVINE LITURGY AND ENTERING INTO A COVENANT WITH GOD

The Divine Liturgy is a renewal, confirmation, and practice of a covenant with God, as the Lord Christ 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 26:27-28 & Luke 22:20 & 1 Corinthians 11:25). What is this agreement or new covenant that is between God and the believer? What are its principles? What are its conditions and benefits?

1. When we participate in the Divine Liturgy, we abide by our covenant with God the Father, which was given by the Son **not by erecting a stone monument** (or a pillar of stone) like Laban and Jacob who demarcate recognized borders so that each would not trespass on the other's domain (Genesis 31:44-45); instead, He gave us His Body and His Blood to draw out the stone from our hearts. He established Himself as the **cornerstone** that binds us to the Father as well as one another. This is the Body that hung on the cross between heaven and earth, not as a boundary but to unite heaven with earth. He opens our earthly hearts so that we can enter what is heavenly; He opens the doors of heaven so that humans can enter. He unites and brings loves, not only between heaven and earth, but between peoples, removing feelings of alienation from God our Father, those in heaven, and our brothers on earth!

In ancient times, the veil (curtain) between the holy of holies and the holy place was so heavy that 300 priests had to carry it, but when the Body of God was hung on the cross the veil tore, heaven opened onto earth, and we gained the right to enter onto His blessed throne!

We thank God that during the Divine Liturgy we find the doors of heaven open and God's embrace awaiting us as we acknowledge His Only-Begotten Son.

2. In ancient times, **blood was essential in establishing covenants**. The prophet Jeremiah refers to a tradition for the participants to cut a calf in two and each having to pass between the two parts (Jeremiah 34:18). This carried the meaning of both revenge and sanctity. Slaughtering of the animal represents the killing of the one who betrays the covenant, and at the same time it is a sacrificial offering for the wrongdoer who thus becomes righteous.

This took place when God established His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15).

The blood also has another significance, namely that **when the two parties eat from one sacrifice they are drawn together into a new kind of relationship**. Even if they are not blood relatives, when they eat from the same sacrifice, the same blood will flow in each of them! In the Divine Liturgy His Blood flows within us, **making us all members of His Body, His holy bride who unites with Him**. We do not enter with the blood of animals which cannot purify or sanctify our souls, or bring us closer to God, our creator; instead, we find the Blood of the Son of God Who offered His life in a sacrifice of love that gives life. In His death, the Lord Christ did not perish like millions of ancient sacrificial animals, rather it was our death that perished and our corruption that was cast away; thus we received the power of resurrection. Accordingly, we see the Divine Liturgy as the confirmation of a unique covenant. It is an agreement for an eternal, heavenly marriage, which nothing, not even death, can stop or weaken its effects. With this covenant, we enter into fellowship with the divine family; we become **the household of God** (Ephesians 2).

3. Whenever there was an covenant, especially between tribes, usually the two sides would sit at one table. This had special meaning, for when they shared the same food, the source of life, it was as if they acquired a common life and belonged to one family. This was a banquet for reconciliation and the establishment of a relationship between them. The Divine Liturgy is called "**the Holy Table**", where the Lord Christ offers His Body and His Blood as food and drink, and we are renewed by Them so we can enter into a true union with God in His Son.

THE DIVINE LITURGY IS OUR NEW PASSOVER

In every Divine Liturgy, we chant with the apostles saying: "For indeed Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us ... " (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jews celebrated Passover as a remembrance of passage, when the angel of death passed by their doors and did not touch them, and their people escaped Pharaoh's bondage and passed onto freedom by entering the promised land.

Passover was a feast that bore past memories as well as expectations of future divine works. They associated the night of the Passover with:

The creation of the world

Abraham's circumcision

The sacrifice of Isaac

Joseph being freed from prison

Their freedom from slavery

The appearance of the Messiah

The coming of Moses and Elijah

The resurrection of the fathers

The end of the world

In contrast, we celebrate Passover every moment of our life, especially when we celebrate the Divine Liturgy. We assemble around our Christ, the Lamb of God, rejoicing that He is our Passover Who leads us passed darkness into light, and from the kingdom of Satan into the joyful Kingdom of God, and from the death onto life - He gave us His resurrection, the mystery of joy, power and uninterrupted prayer.

The Paschal mystery has been fulfilled in the Body of the Lord...

He was led like a lamb and slaughtered like sheep. He ransomed us from the slavery of the world of Egypt, and freed us from the slavery of the devil Satan as from the hand of Pharaoh, and sealed our souls with His own Spirit and our bodily members with His own Blood...

This is the One Who rescued us from slavery to liberty, from darkness to light, from death to life, and from tyranny to the Kingdom of Eternity... He is the Passover of our salvation ...6 **Father Melito of Sardis**

THE DIVINE LITURGY AND CHURCH LIFE

The church is nothing other than **the new life which arose in Jesus Christ**, and enjoyment of experiencing Christ's work for our salvation - the church is a continuation of the prophetic, priestly, and royal work of the Lord Christ.

As we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we enter as if into a clay house (Jeremiah 18) to see our heavenly Christ, extending His hand to us, the mud, to make us a noble worthy that carries within it the Body and Blood of the Lord as a heavenly treasure.

In the Divine Liturgy, we meet the Lord Christ as the sacrifice; we become the church of Christ, His body, which shares in His pains, sufferings, and crucifixion so that it experiences His life and His resurrection!

Pain becomes a principle feature of our life, not as a commandment that we have to obey, but as a natural fruit of our acknowledging Him as the One Who was crucified and abides within us. In the Eucharist, we become the Body of Christ, not symbolically, but as a true member of the Head (1 Corinthians 12:27), and as the branches of a trunk. **St. Augustine** said "there You are on the table! There You are in the chalice!"⁷ By this he meant that we are members in the body of Christ, that we are honored to offer our life to God as a sacrifice of love, and that we should sacrifice for Him.

St. Augustine again sees in the Divine Liturgy the Lord Christ like the high priest, offering to God, His father, His church as a universal sacrifice which shares in His love. In his work concerning the church, *City of God*, he states "this is the mystery that the church celebrates through the sacraments of the altar, wherein it is shown to her that in this Thing that she offers she herself is offered to God."⁸

In his first letter to me when he left for Los Angeles in 1969, the late Father Bishoy Kamel wrote "even as we are separated in body, we congregate together around the altar and the Holy Sacrifice." This is our belief while celebrating the Divine Liturgy - it is a meeting of the entire church around the one altar and one Sacrifice. The apostle St. Paul said "For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:17). **St. Augustine** further adds "He instituted on His altar the sacrament of our peace and unity."⁹ Lastly, during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, we come to know the heavenly nature of the church as we meet the heavenly Christ and He carries us to His heavenly canopy as a heavenly church. **St. Ambrose** said "They hasten to go to the Heavenly Banquet",¹⁰ while **Theodore of Mopsuestia** stated "Then each time when the liturgy of this sacrifice is celebrated, we must consider that we are like one who is in Heaven!"¹¹ According to **St. Irenaeus** "Let us learn by experience that we possess eternal life from the excelling power of this Being (**the Eucharist**), and not by our own nature."

In the celebration, we are elevated above time and place, where we receive our Christ Who does not age and is not subjected to time, but allows us entry into His eternity.

The Divine Liturgy is an evangelic, ecclesiastic journey to heaven.

THE DIVINE LITURGY IS OUR TRUE SABBATH

God stressed the commandment for observing the Sabbath, which He designated as a weekly celebration to fill His people with the spirit of joy. In spite of that, many found it to be a difficult commandment. In celebrating the Divine Liturgy, we observe the commandment with a spiritual, heavenly understanding.

"Sabbath" meant "rest". What rest can the believer enjoy more than the **Eucharist**, which is the mystery of the crucified and resurrected Lord Christ descending into the midst of His people and granting salvation from sin?

Until our Savior's coming, we shall observe the Sabbath spiritually, having rested from sin.¹²
St. Clement of Alexandria

I remember the words of the late Father Bishoy Kamel, when he talked about how the priest collects all the sufferings of the people, not to bear them, but to lay them on Christ's altar during the Divine Liturgy; thus He Who was crucified bears them, giving us true rest, great peace, and glorious joy in the midst of the pains and sufferings of the ministry. The ministry of a priest without the Divine Liturgy would be impossible!

The Eucharist is usually celebrated on Sunday, the eighth day of the week or the first day of the new week; on that day, we entered into the terminal, eternal life through the ascension of our Lord (the number 8 represents what is beyond time).

The church called Sunday "the Lord's day", because on that day the Father rested when He found man righteous and sanctified by His resurrected, sacrificial Son; at the same time, man rests because he finds in the Eucharist reconciliation, love, and unity with the Holy Trinity.

1. St. Justin: Apology 1:61; St. Clem. Alex.: Paed. 1:6; St. Basil On the Holy Spirit, 15.
2. The Eucharistic Prayer.
3. Before the Epiclesis.
4. Adv. Haer. 4:18.
5. On 1 Cor. hom. 24.
6. Paschal Mystery, p. 26-39.
7. Sermon. 229 to the newly-baptized.
8. City of God 10:6:23; Sermon. 227.
9. Sermon. 272 to the newly-baptized.
10. Myster. 43.
11. Catech. hom. 15:20.
12. Library of the Fathers of the Church, Vol. 43.

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE THE EUCHARIST (THE DIVINE LITURGY)? 1994

PART 2

The Eucharist is a festive occasion. During each Divine Liturgy (Eucharist), believers - clergy and lay people - joyfully celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which continually works in their lives. They therefore celebrate without interruption the resurrection of the Lord Christ who dwells in their hearts.

I remember the first Eucharist I celebrated at St. George's Church in Sporting, Alexandria, took a long time. Afterwards, when I met the late "uncle Sadek," who lead a celibate life that was dedicated to practical evangelism and I told him the Liturgy took a long time today, tears filled his eyes and he asked me, "How could you say that? Who is worthy to share in the Eucharist?!" He then continued, "I wish that we could spend all our lives celebrating the Eucharist!"

It was customary for "uncle Sadek" to quietly rush home after the departure of the Angel of the Oblation. He would then lock himself in his private room for an hour or more, so that he would not meet anyone because the Lord Christ was within him! Thus his life was a continual feast because of his attachment to the Eucharist, giving him great peace and glorious joy beyond description!

This was the feeling that we had during our childhood. The Eucharist had its own joy in family life; thus, families used to clean their homes every Saturday in preparation for the joyful weekly feast: Sunday, or participation in the Eucharist. Together with these outwardly preparations, there are internal preparations for the soul to receive the groom as in a wedding.

As I previously stated, the Eucharist is a unique journey, in which the believer, from the moment he leaves his home for church, puts himself under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit to possess, support, and embrace him in order to ascend the path to heaven - meaning through the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ - step by step until the believer comes closer to God and meets the Holy Trinity. The soul rejoices because of God and refuses to leave Him, saying with St. Peter the Apostle, "Lord, it is good for us to be here" (Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).

What a fearful time it is, as the church prepares to be in God's presence with the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and all the heavenly beings, and to present to the Father what is dear to His heart, the sacrifice of His Only Son, the Redeem the whole world.

During the Eucharist, it is as if we leave, not our homes, but our concerns and weekly problems, bringing and putting them at the feet of our Christ, Who fills our life with His glorious joy and gives us His rest.

We are frequently asked the following questions:

Why don't we feel that the Eucharist is a journey to heaven?

Why does our mind wander during the Eucharist?

Why we feel that the Eucharist takes a long time?

First: We cannot separate our celebration of the Eucharist from our daily life. For if our Christ has first priority over our time and thoughts, we begin our day early with Him and end our day with Him ... **we continually call on Him wherever we are, even in our day-dreams and during our sleep** ... therefore our souls rejoice during the Eucharist. We will feel that during the Liturgy our heart, thought, and all our inner self are elevated to heaven.

In the past, Jews used to prepare themselves for a full week before Passover, avoiding leaven (yeast) in their homes. We should similarly prepare ourselves all our days to rejoice in our union with Christ by avoiding the leaven of evil. St. Paul the Apostle said, "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 Cor 5:8).

Second: By practicing repentance daily, we feel the need for our Savior Who forgives sins with His precious blood, and the Eucharist becomes a sincere wish to receive the Savior. Our thoughts, senses and feelings are absorbed in Him.

Repentance, as Lord Christ said, is the way to His Kingdom. It makes us, who are sinners, worthy to partake of communion. **The lack of repentance is a barrier to starting on the joyous path to His Kingdom.**

Third: The believer, who reads the Bible at home every day, feels his soul elevated like a bride who is united with the groom; in this case, the groom is the incarnate Word of God. During the Eucharist, the believer enters the Groom's home, comes to know His mysteries, rejoices in Him, and finds in the Liturgy a true wedding feast with all the senses.

Fourth: The congregation participates with the clergy in celebrating the Eucharist. The Divine Liturgy is a service for the whole church, clergy and lay people, praying together both in soul and mind as Paul the Apostle tells us (1 Corinthians 14:14); thus it is important for us to celebrate the Liturgy in a language that is understood. This is especially true for the children of emigrants.

During the Eucharist, it is befitting that the faithful participate in the praising, thanksgiving, and petitioning as they realize that they are in the company of heavenly beings and are sharing in their praises. They must also be concerned for the whole world, believers and unbelievers alike, praying for the salvation of everyone, spiritual growth, and their union in both faith and love.

Fifth: The Church was accustomed from early times, both in the East and the West, to celebrating the Eucharist while fasting as spiritual preparation for receiving Body and Blood of our Lord.

Perhaps some may ask if the Lord Christ and His apostles fasted?

As the Word of God became incarnate, He willfully surrendered to natural law as He did to the written Law. He even accepted bodily circumcision and practiced worship as one of us; He observed the Sabbath not by the letter but with good deeds and love towards others. The Lord Christ and his disciples were fasting on Maundy Thursday when the Lord Christ established the sacrament of the Eucharist for the following reasons:

1. Since the days of Ezra, every Thursday was a day of fasting and prayer for Moses began his fast on a Thursday in preparation to receive the Ten Commandments and the Law.

The people under Moses' leadership fasted every Thursday, in remembrance of receiving the Law. Is it not proper for us to fast in preparation to accept the Word Himself and receive His Body and His Blood which permeate us?! We receive, not the stone tablets of the Law, but the Word Himself!

2. The Lord Christ and his disciples were fasting, not only because it was Thursday, but because it was necessary for every Jew, who was unable to participate in the service of the temple, to fast for four days before Passover, not eating or drinking until sunset.

3. In remembrance of the salvation of the firstborn of the Jews when the angel of the Lord killed the firstborn of the Egyptians during the night of the Exodus, each firstborn Hebrew had to strictly fast on the day of the Passover. Because the Lord Christ was considered a firstborn, according to the Hebrew tradition he was fasting.

If the Lord Christ asked his disciples to pray and fast to overcome demons (Matthew 17:21), shouldn't we first fast in preparation to rejoice in He who gives us victory and triumph?!

If fasting was one of the principal elements in the preparation for Passover (fasting, praying, confessing sins with true repentance of heart, and offering sacrifices to God), it is befitting for us to fast in preparation to rejoice in the Body and Blood of the Lord, our Passover, Who was slaughtered for us.

Because the Lord Christ and His disciples fasted, we find that all the early churches stressed the need for fasting with repentance and confession in preparation for this great sacrament. Only the sick and those unable to fast are exempted.

Sixth: It is necessary for us to leave our homes with our father Abraham to go to the land which he wanted us to see - meaning his sacred altar. We leave behind our land, our people and our father's home - meaning that we forsake every worldly concern or problem in order to open our inner senses to see the incomparable heavenly mysteries of God, and our hearts could love the whole world through Jesus Christ.

How beautiful it is to pray before leaving our homes and on our way to church, asking God to drive away all fragmentation of our thoughts, so that we can direct ourselves totally towards God with complete concentration.

Seventh: It is befitting for us to come early in the morning to the Lord as Abraham got up early in the morning to offer his beloved son Isaac as a burnt offering to the Lord. Let us hurry to go to the house of the Lord without delay for He gave us an appointment and is waiting for us. He is truly patient, for He waits for us even when we come late, but we may be considered careless if we do not have a real excuse.

Eighth: As we enter the Lord's house, we ascend with Moses the prophet, not up the mountain to receive the Law on stone tablets, but to partake of His life-giving Body and Blood and we remain there until He commands us to leave, so that we do not insult the One Who is with us.

[You entered the church and were deemed worthy to be in Christ's company, do not leave before you are permitted to do so, or you will be asked for the reason and considered a deserter.](#)

St. John Chrysostom

Ninth: The church's codes include:

No one must leave the church without necessity from the reading of the Holy Bible until the offering of the oblations, the blessing of the priest, and the permission to leave.

Pray with awe and in fear, and not with arrogance or for pleasure (showiness).

Stand quietly with purity in the church to hear the Word of God.

No one should speak in the church.

THE EUCHARIST A JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

The Eucharist is in essence a journey to heaven that the church and every believer within (whether clergy or lay person) experiences. Accordingly, it is difficult to divide this Divine Liturgy into discrete parts, other than for the purpose of learning about it for spiritual understanding and to follow the Eucharist, not by listening, but by participating.

Parts of the Divine Liturgy

In the early church, the Liturgy was divided into two main parts:

1. The Liturgy of the Catechumens: This part is predominately, catechismal, missionary, and evangelic in nature without ignoring worship. Some scholars call it the **Synaxis**.

2. The Liturgy of the Faithful, or the Eucharist: The second part is also called **the Anaphora** in Coptic, which is derived from Greek for "elevation (of a man or an object) upwards." This part is characterized by profound worship, through which the Holy Spirit **elevates** us up to heaven to meet the Lord Christ, Who was sacrificed, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven; we are united with Him without ignoring the need for instruction.

Some scholars believe that the two parts were separate in all early churches until they were combined into one service in the fourth century.

The Parts of the Coptic Divine Liturgy

During the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit blesses us with a journey to heaven; we are in the company of our Lord Jesus Christ such that we abide in Him and He in us, and that we may find a place for us in His Father's embrace. The Coptic Liturgy is divided into:

1. Praise and the Divine Office (The Morning Raising of Incense or Matins): These are preparations for this journey, or an the invitation for the entire world - seen and unseen, mankind as well as other creations - to enter into a life of praising God, the Creator and the Savior.

Before the beginning of the prayers of the liturgy, the priest and the congregation praise, on behalf of all creation, the Savior and enter into an intimate discourse with Him. We rejoice in joining the heavenly beings in their praise, and call on heaven and earth, even the animals, birds, mountains, rivers and all creation, to glorify the Creator!

Those in heaven join those on earth around "the Cross" to sing to the Lamb of God Who bears the sins of the world; He takes us - the earthly beings - to share in His heavenly glory. Our hearts are elevated in prayers for all the needs of the church and mankind.

St. Peter, the seal of the martyrs, expressed his feelings concerning this joyful celebration when he discussed the Epiphany and told of how all of creation rejoices in Him; we can apply these same words to the sacrament of the Eucharist:

*The entire world has been filled with joy today, O my beloved!
the inhabitants of heaven rejoice;
the angels celebrate;
all of humanity rejoices;
paradise shouts aloud;
the entire firmament is dancing;
The cattle in the meadow are skipping,
And the beasts of the field are shouting aloud;
All of the waters are clapping their hands;
The foul smell has turned to a fragrance of perfume,
And the darkness has turned to light,
and all the trees have spread their branches.*

St. Peter I of Alexandria

2. The Offertory: In the early days of the church, this rite was part of the liturgy of the faithful, but since the 5th century it has preceded the liturgy of the catechumens so that the people, upon hearing the word of God, would be prepared to renew their covenant with God and enjoy in sharing the Holy Sacraments.

From the onset of the journey, the church **should know its price**; it is therefore obligated to devote its entire life to the sacrificial Christ, a sacrifice to the Lord Who was sacrificed on our behalf. The Lord Who gave His life in sacrifice **does not accept anything less the church offering her whole life in sacrifice on His behalf**. This is the price of the journey: the blood of the Lamb that gives forth to the church the spirit of unlimited self-sacrifice.

3. The Lections (Liturgy of the Catechumens or the Word): This is the itinerary and guide of the journey. The lections of the church, consisting of readings from the Old and New Testaments, the history of the church, and the sermon, are the map by which we understand our position relative to God, our relationship with Him, and His dealings with us; without this map, we lose our way and will not reach our aim.

In these lections (readings), the church also declares its testimony to God, the aim of the journey, and she witnesses in front of His children and in front of the catechumens, so that they may hear His Divine Voice through:

- a. His apostles: **The Pauline and Catholic Epistles** - the epistles of our teacher Paul the Apostle and the other epistles.
- b. The acts of His Apostles: **The Acts** - the book of the acts of the apostles.
- c. The work of the church: **The Synaxarion** - a record of the feasts of the Lord Christ, the heavenly creatures, the martyrs, and saints.
- d. Praise: **The Psalms**.
- e. His Son: **The Gospels**.
- f. His ministers: **The Sermon**.

These lections are combined with prayers which the church offers so that God's Holy Spirit may work within the hearts of both listeners and readers, and that they may complete their journey in joyful expectation.

4. The Prayers (or Litanies): During this spiritual journey, the church lifts up its heart to the Divine Throne so that God may preserve its peace (**Prayer for Peace**), support its ministers (**Prayer for the Fathers**), and bless its meetings (**Prayer for the Meetings**), in order that the church complete its mission without deviation.

5. The Pre-Anaphora: As everyone prepares to be elevated to heaven and to sit with our Lord Jesus Christ, the church declares the reconciliation of God with mankind through Jesus Christ (**Prayer of Reconciliation**); the faithful respond in a practical way by reconciling themselves with one another (**Aspasmos or the holy kiss**).

6. The Anaphora: This is the entry into heaven where the mystery of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis) takes place and the bread and wine are transformed into the Holy Body and Blood of the Lord, and we are spiritually nourished by communion in a spirit of praise and joyfulness.

PRAISE AND THE RAISING OF INCENSE OR SHARING IN ANGELIC WORSHIP 1994 PART 3

THE BEGINNING OF THE HEAVENLY PATH

The Eucharist is a journey for the whole church - clergy and lay people alike - towards heaven; it is a unique, enjoyable, joyful, holy and yet fearful journey. In this journey, the Holy Spirit carries us to the Throne of Divine Blessing, where we find the open arms of the Father for us, his children. We meet the Slaughtered Lamb, in Whom we abide and Who abides in us, giving to us His Body and Blood so that we may bear His holy nature.

The journey begins with what is called "praise" or "the raising of morning or evening incense" (matins or vespers, respectively)... we begin on the heavenly path by entering into an angelic atmosphere that lifts up our hearts, thoughts and senses and elevates us towards the Heavenly King Himself.

I do not wish to go into intellectual studies concerning praise and the raising of incense, but wish that God's Holy Spirit may elevate us to the Heavenly Path itself, so that we can understand the experience and taste it!

PRAISE

PRAISE AND THE EUCHARIST

When we examine praise and raising of the incense - which consist of prayers, thanksgiving, supplications, readings, honoring of the saints, and asking for intercessions on behalf of every deserving human soul with the spirit of repentance - we find this to be the church's entry to the Eucharist. Moreover, if we consider all of this effort to be a spiritual struggle, we recognize that the Eucharist is like a reward for our spiritual efforts, where we accept the Heavenly King, Who was crucified, rose from the dead, and dwells within us; He gives us his Body and His Blood so that we can live through Him and with Him, until we meet Him face to face!

It is important for us to understand the following spiritual facts:

1. **Praise is the beginning as well as the end point of the Eucharist service.** We begin the service with praise, we practice it with praise, and we end it with praise. Praise is not just an introduction but the beginning and the end of the road, because our path is the Lord Christ, the Beginning and the End; He is **our continual feast** and the secret to our joy and unceasing praise. Daily praise prepares the soul to receive the King and for our union with Him, and it ignites the soul with the spirit of joy and rejoicing. It is as if **praise prepares us for enjoyment of the Eucharist, and the Eucharist propels us towards unceasing daily praise.**

2. **Praise** in its broad sense is not just singing certain sections from written or church praises in specific tunes. **It is a sign of victory in the life of the church** and all human existence. The souls that rejoice in their Christ think about the throne that the Holy One sits on, as the psalmist says "But You are Holy, Who inhabit the praises of Israel" (Psalms 22:3).

The church as a heavenly bride shares in the work of the heavenly beings, meaning unceasing praise! Every day the church practices the **prayers of the canonical hours**, day and night in the spirit of praise, singing "**Praise** of the first, third, or sixth hour, etc." The church similarly conducts itself in the spirit of the psalmist who says, "Seven times a day **I praise You**" (Psalms 119:164).

Jeremiah the prophet used to praise the Lord in the midst of his troubles, and asked everyone to praise, "Sing to the Lord! **Praise the Lord!** For He has delivered the life of the poor from the hand of evildoers" (Jeremiah 20:13).

Daniel the prophet also in the midst of his troubles praised, "he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and **gave thanks** before his God" (Daniel 6:10).

The Paul and Silas, the two imprisoned apostles, "were praying and **singing hymns** to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25).

In praise we witness the work of the Bible and preach it; thus "**they shall proclaim** the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6), and "**I will declare** your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation **I will sing praise to You**" (Hebrews 2:12).

Even the **written lections** are read with the spirit of praise, whether it is the Psalms, Pauline Epistles, Catholic Epistles, or the Holy Bible.

We praise the Lord not only in public worship but even in quiet, personal moments, as St. Athanasius said, "The rested soul forgets its pains, and by singing holy words looks with joy to Christ alone."

PRAISE IS CONTINUAL SACRIFICE

Praise is not only preparation for the Eucharist service but also **a holy sacrifice that ties our daily life with the sacrifice of the Eucharist, or the sacrifice of Christ Whose rejoicing is His suffering and crucifixion.** As the apostle said, "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame... 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 12:2 and 13:15). David the prophet also called praise a sacrifice (Psalms 27:6; 116:17; 50:14; 141:2).

The martyr Euston said, "prayers and thanksgiving can be considered offerings of complete sacrifice which are accepted by God." He also said, "the unique honor that is befitting of God is not burnt offerings; but to honor Him... by giving thanks through praise and hymns because He is our creator."

PRAISE IS COLLECTIVE WORK FOR THE CHURCH

Praise is the human being's response to the love of God, so our feelings, senses, thoughts, and desires become like strings of a musical instrument expressing a tune of love that matches the supreme love of God. This response is apparent during public worship in church or personal worship in one's chambers, even during sleep and work.

It is important to realize that praise is a single individual's job, but a joint effort for everyone - the victorious and the struggling - with the tunes of heavenly beings, even as we sleep:

"Before the angels I will sing praises to You" (Psalm 138).

"Praise Him in all His Saints" (Psalm 150).

"In the midst of the congregation I will praise You" (Psalm 22).

In heaven the believer shares with the church in its eternal glorification and praise; he or she does not praise in a solitary tone... thus the practice of praise and all the liturgies reveal to the faithful their membership in the church, make them aware that they are not only joining in church services but are an inseparable part of it, a natural fruit of the Holy Spirit. During the Pentecost, "those who gladly received his word were baptized... 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... and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2)

PRAISE IN THE RITES OF THE CHURCH AND DAILY LIFE

Some observe that praise in the rites of the Coptic Church is very long compared to the Eucharist service. Besides the praise of the daily canonical hours, the church practices praise in vespers before the evening offering (raising) of incense, then the praise of midnight which continues late in the evening, followed by the praise of the matins, the morning offering of incense, etc. The feeling that these rites are long is because we do not practice praise in our daily life, neither in word nor with our hearts.

Until recently in some cities, like Naqadah which is known for textiles, the majority of people repeated praises as they worked at home, each family leaving their doors open so that they could share with one another in praise. In villages, the workers in the fields daily practice praise in a loud voice as they farm, creating an atmosphere of joy. We hear that when hermits, monks and "spirit-borne" anchorites meet, they do not speak of others but share in praise during their entire encounter.

Thus praise is not a specific church function, but the daily work of every Christian, at home and in church. With this spirit, the faithful used to meet together, every day when possible, but especially on the eve of Sunday, to spend as much of their time sharing in praise, participating in:

1. The praise of vespers,
2. Evening raising of incense,
3. Midnight praise,
4. The praise of matins,
5. Morning raising of incense, and finally
6. The service of the Divine Liturgy with its two parts:
 - a. The Liturgy of the Catechumens,
 - b. The Liturgy of the Faithful.

THE PRAISE OF VESPERS

When the faithful meet for vespers, they offer praise as follows:

First: The prayers (praise) of the canonical hours - the ninth, eleventh and twelfth hours. If it is a day of fasting, only the eleventh and twelfth hours are said.

Second: The hymn of "All you nations" Psalm 117 (116 LXX) which calls on all the nations to praise:

O praise the Lord, all you nations!
Laud Him, all you peoples!
For His merciful kindness is great toward us,
And the truth of the Lord endures forever.
Halleluia!

Third: The fourth period consists of three psalms (148, 149, and 150). Some consider that these praises were originally the prayer of "El SAHAR", which was used in vespers just as it was added to the midnight prayer; the prayer of the first hour has since taken its place.

Psalm 148 is an invitation for all creation to share in praise: an invitation for heavenly beings, the stars, the planets, the waters and all creation. It is an invitation to the kings and the people, and to the young and old, even the children. It is an invitation for everyone to praise the Lord: Praise the Lord from the heavens; halleluia...
Praise Him, all His angels; halleluia...
Praise Him, sun and moon; halleluia...
Let them praise the name of the Lord, halleluia...

This is the spirit of the church since its beginning, inviting everyone and everything to praise, even the material creation. This is a written thought for the psalmist declares that the waters praise God (Psalms 93:3, 4; 148:4), and the heavens and heavenly bodies praise Him (Psalm 19:1).

It is notable that the first church hymn recorded on musical notes dates back to the second century and is called the "Hymn of Oxyrhynchus," or the hymn of Bahnasa, which was discovered in Bahnasa in upper Egypt; it states the following:

All of God's great creations can not stand silent!
Nor can the stars that carry the light hide.
All the waves that fill the rivers praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
And the powers share with them. Amen, Amen...

Psalm 149 is an invitation for God's holy people to offer new praise to the Holy One: Sing to the Lord a new song. Halleluia...
Let Israel rejoice their Maker. Halleluia.
Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. Halleluia.
Let them praise His name with the dance. Halleluia.
Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp. Halleluia.
For the Lord takes pleasure in his people. Halleluia.
He will beautify the humble with salvation. Halleluia.
Let the saints be joyful in glory. Halleluia...
With a new heart and a nature of continual renewal God's holy people praise continuously, for our encounter with the Holy One drives us to offer new praise that never ages or wears out!

Psalm 150 is an invitation for every individual to share in praise together: Praise God in his saints (sanctuary). Halleluia...
Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet. Halleluia.

Praise Him with psaltery (lute) and harp. Halleluia...

Praise Him with timbrel and chorus. Halleluia...

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Halleluia.

Thus all humanity, its talent, and its actions are considered like musical instruments for praising God.

Fourth: The **psalm of the day** (or of a feast), meaning a hymn, is similar to a poem in which each section or paragraph is arranged alphabetically... it resembles a heart-felt prayer through which the faithful repeat the name of Christ in a holy focused prayer.

Fifth: The **theotokion of the day**, popularly referred to as "tazakia," is beatification of the Mother of God. It is a divine piece, full of the spirit of the Holy Bible, confirming that the One born from the Virgin is the Word of God.

El shirat: "Peace... " is beatification to the Holy Virgin because:

- a. She offers us a living example of God's blessings to human life.
- b. She illuminates the living understanding of the church, which accepts the wealth of God's blessings.
- c. She possesses a preeminent motherhood and love.

The **ending of the theotokia** is addressed to the Lord Christ, ascertaining that in honoring the saints, our attention is focused onto Christ, the Head of the Church, and through Whom everyone is sanctified by His Holy Spirit.

The **tone of the praise** on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays is the tone of "Adam," which is the first word in the theotokion of Monday. On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays the "watus" tone is used; the latter means "bush" which is the first word of the theotokion of Tuesday.

THE EVENING OFFERING (RAISING) OF INCENSE PRAISE, PETITIONS, AND INTERCESSIONS

In an extraordinary and unique way the church assembles to begin with the prayers of the canonical hours, then sings praise, and finally offers evening incense. This three part worship provides the soul the ability to worship in a true biblical spirit. **The soul realizes that it must practice unceasing worship every hour of our sojourn in this world, praying in a universal and collective spirit, and through love forgetting to ask for oneself what is asked on behalf of others.**

First: In the **prayers of the canonical hours** (ninth, eleventh and twelfth), the faithful declare that they devote all the daylight and evening hours of their sojourn to praising God, becoming like the angels and longing to change their life into one of unceasing praise.

Second: During the evening praise, the church invites all the nations to come and share in praise, just as the heavenly and earthy beings are all invited to participate.

The church asks the nations to join the joyful body of the Lord, so that everyone becomes part of one church composed of heavenly and earthy beings. The invitation is even for the material creation like the stars, the trees, the water, the mountains and the hills... to participate in praising the Creator.

Third: After the preceding the **evening offering (or raising) of incense** begins with the same understanding. The purpose of this rite is for man to forget himself in love for God and other people; he desires the forgiveness of sins for all mankind, not for himself but for everyone else, even for those who have reposed (passed away)...

The rite of offering incense is in reality the church interceding on behalf of every member and the whole world, even those who have reposed.

This is what we should experience during the evening as well as the morning offering of incense.

THE OFFERING OR RAISING OF INCENSE

Some have asked, "**When did the use of incense begin in the Christian Church?**"

Some scholars believe that the use of incense began only after the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

This position is supported by the absence of references to incense in the Euchologion of St. Serapion the Copt (a friend of Pope Athanasius), as well as in the writings of the fathers and the apostles.

This opinion is not acceptable for the following reasons:

First: It is necessary to make the distinction between the use of incense in Christian spiritual worship as an expression of offering what is in the heart as burnt offering, a sweet-smelling incense that ascends towards the Divine Throne... , and the use of incense by the Jews as a daily service in the temple, and the offering of incense by pagans in their idol worship while denying Christ.

The apostles joined the daily temple service and they never thought to abandon it except when they were forced away. This service consisted of the singing of psalms, readings from the Old Testament, praise, petitions, and the offering of incense. It was said,

"So **continuing daily** with one accord in the temple" (Acts 2:46).

"Now Peter and John went up together **to the temple** at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1).

They entered the temple daily to share in worship and to witness for the Lord Christ, for it is written, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

The offering of incense was not like animal sacrifice which was symbolism that ended when Lord Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice. It was said of the heavenly service, "the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp and golden bowls **full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints**" (Revelation 5:8).

Second: The Lord Christ himself joined the daily temple service until the eve of his crucifixion. "And when they had sung an hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30).

Third: The psalmist says, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141). God himself confirmed the use of incense with the offerings of the Holy faith from the nations "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going

down, My Name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My Name, and a pure offering; for My Name shall be great among the nations,' said the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 1:11).

Fourth: Incense was referred to in the New Testament as heavenly angelic work, "Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. And 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" (Revelation 8:3).

PUBLIC WORSHIP

The Coptic liturgy is characterized by a collective spirit, for the role of the congregation (people) in the liturgies is vital and essential... for this reason the church does not recognize secretive services that priests practice without the people.

For a long time ago, all the people used to reply, and there were not any designated singers (deacons who lead the people) until weakness developed in the church... we therefore find that concerning the responses church books specify, "the people reply" not "the deacons reply." Truly successful deacons blend their voices with the people in perfect harmony. Separation of the deacons' voice from the people is a sign of weakness that needs correction. When one deacon's voice stands out (sometimes referred to as the teacher) from the others, this a deviation that should avoided, for we do not find in the Divine Liturgy anything that calls for a solo response from any deacon outside the altar.

We should also note that the word liturgy is formed from two parts: the first part "lios" means "the people" and the second "ergon" means "work." Thus the liturgy is collective public worship and not that of a single priest or deacon.

SILENT (INAUDIBLE) PRAYER

Even with the church's emphasis on collective public worship, it does not ignore the role of the individual, whether priest, deacon, or member of the congregation. The church looks at the priest as a man of prayer, whose mouth and heart do not stop praying from the time he enters the church until the time he leaves. The priest is continuously praying... during the offering of incense, the readings, the preparation of the altar, etc. until the people depart.

The church means for the priest to be continually occupied in his thoughts with short prayers that he repeats without stopping. While offering incense during vespers, the priest inaudibly repeats "the blessing of the evening incense, may its holy blessings be upon us, amen." While offering incense during matins, he repeats, "the blessing of the morning incense, may its holy blessings be upon us, amen." During the incense of the Pauline epistle, he repeats, "the blessing of Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, may his holy blessing be upon us, amen." During the incense of the Apraxis, he repeats, "the blessing of our fathers the apostles, our teacher Paul and the rest of the apostles, may their holy blessing be upon us, amen."

As for the priest, he has many silent prayers.

SPIRITUAL CODES FOR OF THE RITE OF OFFERING INCENSE

If we get away from the details and look at the practice of offering incense, from the beginning to the end - whether vespers or matins - we find a beautiful picture or a living icon of heavenly life in the midst of the worldly reality in which we live. There is no separation between the heavenly

experience where the Spirit of God elevates us to the Divine Throne to worship with the heavenly beings, and the feeling of an obligation towards every human soul and to ask for the needs of the whole world.

Without ignoring the Coptic liturgy's confirmation of the primary and essential role of the people in the services, we can understand the principal elements of the practice of offering or raising of incense from the prayers of the bishop, when he is present; it shows us the role of this rite in the life of the faithful:

1. The opening of the altar curtain = enjoyment of a heavenly experience
2. The prayer of thanksgiving = enjoyment of a thankful nature
3. The prayer of "*ephnoti nai nan* ... God, have mercy upon us" = intercession on behalf of everyone
4. The reading (praising) of the Bible = immersion into God's Word
5. The lesson (sermon) = the continual need for learning
6. The prayer for the congregation = the presence of God amongst His people
7. The absolution = the need for the forgiveness of sins.

According to the Coptic rite these seven prayers and praises are followed by the bishop, when present, and they reveal the different and complete basis in the rite of offering incense:

First: The aim of the rite is for us to become acquainted with heaven, not the knowledge of sermons or discussions, but first and foremost the knowledge of goodness and the taste of its reward. The bishop or the priest **opens the altar curtain** after he removes his head dress, asking everyone to enter to heaven and dwell in it. The word altar in Coptic comes from word for "heaven." We say in a certain part of the prayer of the third hour, "as we stand in Your holy altar, we stand in heaven." **St. John Chrysostom** said, "when you see the altar curtain open, be sure then that heaven has been opened in its heights."

Thus all the faithful lift up their hearts with the priest as he opens the altar curtain, saying:
Have mercy upon us O God the Father, the Pantocrator.

O Holy Trinity have mercy upon us.
O Lord, the **God of hosts** be with us,

For we have no support in our difficulties and troubles other than You.

It is as if each time the believer shares in the raising of incense, he declares that in the midst of difficulties and troubles he always finds, through the mercy of the Holy Trinity, the doors of heaven open - realizing that he has joined the heavenly forces as a righteous soldier of Jesus Christ. This is why he likes the title "**Lord, the God of hosts**" and asks "**be with us.**"

Second: The bishop or priest prays the **prayer of thanksgiving**... for He does not accept our prayers as sweet smelling incense unless they come from a thankful heart. An ungrateful heart stands as a barrier to the incense ascending beyond the roof of the church... but thankfulness makes the soul like incense that no one can prevent from reaching God's Throne.

Third: The prayer of "*ephnoti nai nan*;" the bishop or priest takes the cross and three lighted candles, stands in humility, and raises his hands in prayer:
God have mercy upon us,

Make mercy for us (*making the sign of the cross towards the east*)

Be merciful to us.

Hear us (*crossing the north*)

Bless us (*crossing the west*)

And preserve us (*crossing the south*)

And protect us (*crossing the east*)

And remove your wrath away from us,

With your salvation care for us, and forgive us our sins.

That is how the whole church seeks refuge in the crucified Christ, who enlightens the world, and asks for the mercy, blessing and forgiveness of sins from east to west.

Fourth: The **reading of the Holy Bible**; the job of the bishop or priest is to conceal himself in the Word of God, so that God Himself might speak to His people and that everyone may be blessed with the gospel of salvation... he does not read but sings for these are songs of God's love to his church; both the clergy and people experience continual rejoicing in Him.

Fifth: The **lesson**; the church is like a mother in that she offers spiritual nourishment to her children for their spiritual growth. In the lesson, the bishop or priest is addressing himself first before others. As St. Ambrose said, everyone but God needs teaching while he teaches. This is the feeling of a well known bishop... that he is in need of learning every day.

Six: The **prayer for the congregation** is when the priest asks God to bless His people with His presence amongst them.

Seventh: The **absolution**; In this heavenly atmosphere, everyone, bishop together with the priests and people, feel the need for the forgiveness of sins. For this reason the bishop (or priest) asks God to grant him and everyone present the forgiveness of sins, so that everyone leaves the service having shed all their problems and sins at the feet of the Savior. They leave as if on wings to practice a heavenly life during their sojourn on earth.

The preceding are the principal elements of the rite of raising incense in Christian worship. It is worship in an opened heaven, after having been blessed with a new thankful nature. It is worship to open mankind's heart with love, and prayers for all mankind. It is worship to conceal oneself in the joyful Word of God, and feel the need for continual learning.

It is worship to shed every sin at the feet of the Savior, so that man can ascend like a light cloud towards heaven!

THE RITE OF RAISING INCENSE AND ITS THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTENT

First: The Opening of the Altar Curtain

We already pointed out that when the priest opens the altar curtain, he calls on everyone to ascend towards heaven to see the glory of the Holy Trinity. Concerning **St. John Saba**, it was said that when he opened the altar curtain he would frequently stand silently... once he stood for almost three hours; one of his aids found out that he did not dare to enter the altar because he saw the presence of God's glory on the altar with indescribable majesty.

This rite is accompanied by feeling the need for **reconciling between God and his people**. The priest asks for reconciliation with God through the mercy of the Holy Trinity (as we saw) and kneels in humility in front of the altar saying, "**we worship You O Christ with your Righteous Father and the Holy Spirit, because You have come and saved us.**"

He then asks for reconciliation with the people by bowing in front of the people and clergy with a *metania*, or bowing, and kisses his brothers the other clergy and says, "**I have sinned, forgive me.**"

It is impossible to participate in worship without the spirit of love, humility and forgiveness. The Lord said, "And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). Paul the apostle also said, "Therefore I desire that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Timothy 2:8).

Second: The Prayer of Thanksgiving (with the offering of incense)

Upon every occasion, whether in group or individual prayer, we must remember the multitude of God's blessings, so we offer Him our thanks.

1. On every condition.
2. For His salvation ("**for You have protected us**").
3. For giving us the chance to pray ("**and brought us to this hour**").
4. The church does not forget to thank God Who gave her authority to tread upon Satan, but with a spirit of humility not conceit. The priest prays saying,

"... for it is You Who have given us the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and every power of the enemy. And lead us not into temptation..."

The deacon asks the people to pray for God's mercy and compassion, and that He may accept the prayers and supplications of the saints that carry the struggling church and do not stop praying for the salvation of its members. He says "**Pray that God has mercy and compassion upon us, ... and accepts the prayers and supplications of His saints for our righteousness at all times and forgives our sins.**"

Third: The Five Handfuls of Incense

After the prayer of thanksgiving, the priest then puts **five handfuls of incense** as he thanks the Holy Trinity:

The first hand: "**Blessed be God the Father, the Pantocrator.**"

The second hand: "**Blessed be His Only-Begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus.**"

The third hand: "**Blessed be the Holy Spirit,**" Who sanctifies our lives.

The forth hand: The doxology "**Glory to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.**"

The fifth hand: Unending gratitude, "**Now, and at all times and forevermore.**"

The five hands most probably represent five oblations (offerings); the priest prays inaudibly (during the offering of morning incense) "**O God Who accepted the offerings of the righteous Abel, and the sacrifices of Noah and Abraham, and the incense of Aaron and Zecharias.**"

Each of these offerings had its own significance:

Abel's offerings: the offering of the choice firstlings to God (Genesis 4:4, 5).

Noah's sacrifice: this reminds us of the renewal of the world by water through sacrifice (Genesis 8).

Abraham's sacrifice: the entry into a covenant with God.

Aaron's incense: this is linked to the lighting of the lamps in the morning and evening (Exodus 30:1-8), reminding us of the aim of prayer which is enlightenment.

Zacharias' incense: the opening of heaven and enjoyment of the service of angels (Luke 1:5-13). Incense is linked to the Cross, so the priest inaudibly prays,

"May our prayers rise straight before You as sweet-scented incense. The lifting up of our hands is an evening offering, for **You, indeed, are the true evening offering Who sacrificed Himself on the honored Cross** for our sins, according to the will of Your Good Father..."

Fourth: The Censing of the Altar

The priest with the deacon goes turn around the altar three times, confirming that our prayers are offered to the Holy Trinity through the sacrifice of the Cross (the altar).

The following should be noted during the censing of the altar:

1. The priest alternates in offering incense around the altar first while facing east, and then again when facing west while he is in the embrace of the Father (Who is in the east). During this he declares that he is offering incense to God on behalf of the entire church (facing east), and that he is offering the incense on behalf of the clergy, the deacons and the people when he faces them (towards the west).
2. The priest censes with the censer over the altar three times in a circular fashion; the first time on the right of the altar, the second time to the left, and the third time in the middle... a reference to the offering of incense to the Holy Trinity Who is One God and one essence (the circle).
3. During the censing, the priest inaudibly prays three short litanies - for peace, for the fathers, and for the congregation (gatherings), while the deacon stands across from him on the opposite side of the altar.

Fifth: The Offering of Incense at the Sanctuary Door

1. The priest censes three times towards the east while bowing:

We worship You O Christ with Your Righteous Father and the Holy Spirit because You did come and save us.

And through the abundance of Your mercy, I enter Your house and worship towards Your holy sanctuary.

I sing praises to You in front of the angels and worship towards Your holy sanctuary.

These prayers are compatible with the biblical thinking of the church towards worship, which is offered to the Holy Trinity as individual worship using "I"; the believer feels the abundance of God's mercy as he enters His holy place, and participates with the heavenly beings (angels).

2. Censing towards the north (towards St. Mary), he says, "**We send You greetings with Gabriel the angel, saying: Hail to you, Who are full of grace, the Lord is with you.**" ... here the incense is offered in the name of the entire triumphant church, which has enjoyed an abundance of God's blessings. Because the Mother of God became the exemplary and first member of the holy church, she is entitled to all beatification! We ask for her prayers on our behalf!

Thus in every worship we always ask for the prayers of others on our behalf, especially those of the angels, the saints, and foremost St. Mary.

3. He then censes towards the people (west) and says, "**Hail to the hosts of angels, my masters the apostles, and to the ranks of martyrs and to all the saints.**"

It is as if the priest is asking for the prayers of the struggling church as he sees it in the heavenly Jerusalem, united with the angels, the apostles, the martyrs and all the saints.

4. He censes towards the south where the icon of St. John the Baptist located next to the icon of the Lord Christ. The priest says, "**Hail to John the son of Zacharias. Hail to the priest the son of the priest,**" confirming the vital role of the men of the Old Testament as members of the church.

5. He again turns towards the east to end the offering in the name of our Savior Who accepts our prayers as sweet-scented incense: "**Let us worship our Savior the Lover of Mankind, for He had compassion on us and saved us.**"

Sixth: The Hymn of the Cymbals

During the previous censuring inside and in front of the sanctuary, the people and the deacons sing the hymn of the cymbals, through which we glorify the Holy Trinity and beatify the heavenly beings and saints.

Seventh: Prayers for the Departed, the Sick and the Travelers

During vespers the priest now prays a **prayer** for the departed, while during matins he prays prayers for the sick and those traveling... the deacon asks the people to remember the names of those who have reposed, the sick, or those traveling... during the offering of incense the priest and the people pray on behalf every human, even those who have reposed.

It is notable that almost every prayer, during vespers or matins, is offered with incense.

The following should be noted concerning these prayer:

1. The **prayer for the departed** is said during the evening offering of incense because sunset always reminds us of our departure from this world. It is as though when we prepare to depart we think of those who departed before us, and we ask on their behalf for God's mercy... hoping that those who depart after us will similarly pray for us!

2. The **prayers for the sick and for travelers** are said during the morning offering of incense because the church is like a hospital that opens its doors in the early morning to receive the sick, offering them the Lord Christ as both the physician and medicine at the same time. Similarly, the church feels the need of travelers for God's care from danger; traveling in the old days was limited to daytime (Psalm 104:22, 23), especially in the early morning before the sun got very hot.

3. In the morning offering of incense on Sundays (or during feasts or occasions), the **prayer for the oblations** is said instead of the prayer for travelers for it was forbidden to travel on God's day and people used to offer oblations, firstlings and gifts to Christ's church.

In this prayer, the church prays for those who offer gifts gladly, "**those who would offer but have none... grant them the incorruptible in place of the corruptible, the heavenly instead of the earthly, and the eternal instead of the temporal. Fill their homes and stores with all**

blessings." Thus the church prays for every soul who is eager to give, even if unable, so that God may grant them heavenly and earthly blessings.

The church considers these offerings sacrifices of love that are linked to Christ's sacrifice; the priest prays, "**Accept them upon Your holy, heavenly altar**, as scented incense" for Paul the Apostle said, "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16).

4. During Saturday matins, the prayer for the **departed** is said in lieu that for the sick, in remembrance of the presence of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ in the tomb on Bright Saturday.

Eight: The Circuit of the Evening or Morning Incense

The priest now performs what is called the circuit of evening or morning incense:

1. He begins by censuring **around the altar inside the sanctuary one time**... thus prayers are not accepted unless the believer enters onto the heavenly altar through the sacrifice of the Cross.
2. The priest now offers incense at the sanctuary door in all four directions as described earlier.
 - a. Towards the east three times where we declare our submission to God our Savior.
 - b. Towards the north one time: beatifying St. Mary the intercessor as a mother full of kindness towards mankind, and as a vivid example for the soul that is aflame with a spirit that does not cease praying for everyone, even after its departure.
 - c. Towards the west (facing the people): beatifying the angels, martyrs, and saints from whom Christ's people are never separated.
 - d. Towards the south (directed towards the icon of St. John the Baptist): confirming our ties with the men of the Old Testament, as represented by St. John the Baptist who recognized the Lord Christ through faith even in the womb.
 - e. Again towards the east: just as we begin by worshipping God, we end with Him, for He is the beginning and the end of our lives.
3. In front of the **Holy Bible** whose letters hide the Divine Word, and to which we offer every honor and respect as a living worship.
4. In front of the **bishop and clergy**: we petition for them and ask for their petitions. This is what some call "**sharing in the priests' incense**." The priest feels the need for everyone's prayers for himself, as well as to open his heart to pray on behalf of everyone else: clergy and lay people. His Grace Bishop Mettaos has a beautiful commentary on the censuring of the bishop: the incense is not offered to him, but rather for him to accept and raise it to God... in a similar fashion an organization which wants give a gift to the president chooses one of its leaders to present the gift. The incense is the prayers of the people that the priest or bishop present to God along with his own prayers.
The bishop is censured three times, the hegumenos (protopriest) is censured twice, and the priest is censured once.
5. In front of the **icons**: this is offered to the Lord Christ as worship, but for the saints it is to honor them and ask for their prayers.
6. **Amidst the people**... the priest passes between them, as if he is collecting their silent prayers, which he carries along with the love in their hearts in an censer of love to be offered as sweet incense on the Divine Altar.
7. In front of the **Baptistery**.
8. When the priest approaches the **main entrance of the church**, he says "Jesus Christ of yesterday, today and forever: One Hypostasis Whom we worship and glorify" (review Hebrews

13:8). Perhaps, this because the priest feels that the Lord Christ in His love has occupied the last rows of the church, so the priest glorifies Him Who stands behind His people, embracing and leading them into the arms of His Father or the Holy Altar. As the priest sees the people entering from the main west entrance he glorifies the Lord Christ Who said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

The priest stands for a few moments offering incense in front of the main entrance inside the church in the shape of the cross... it is as if he sees the entrance of the church as the mount of Golgotha on which the Lord's Cross was erected, through which the entire church is carried to heaven. The prayers of the priest as he censes offer the same meanings:

From the east: **"He offered Himself as an acceptable sacrifice on the Cross for the salvation of our race"** (review Ephesians 5:2).

From the north: **"And His Good Father accepted His sacrifice one evening on Golgotha."**

From the west: **"And He then opened the door of Paradise and brought back Adam once more to His Lordship."**

From the south: **"Through His Cross and His Holy Resurrection, He brought man back once more to Paradise."**

9. The priest completes the circuit by heading back to the sanctuary, where he ascends to the altar and offers one hand of incense saying, **"Glory and honor, honor and glory to the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."** He then censes over the altar while saying inaudibly the **mystery of the people's absolution**, asking God to accept their repentance and confession:

O God Who accepted the confession of the thief on the Honored Cross, accept the confession of Your people. Forgive them all their sins for the sake of your Holy Name Which is called upon us. Let it be according to your mercy, O Lord, and not according to our sins.

This prayer is also called the **mystery of the return**, because the priest offers it after he returns from censing the church hall.

It is be noted that until; recently the priest used to put his hand on the head of everyone present during the censing circuit; he asked for God's blessing, acquainted himself with the people present, and took quick confessions... As for the people, they repeat silently "I ask You my Lord Jesus Christ to forgive my sins which I commit knowingly and unknowingly"... it is as if the priest collects these confessions to present them at the Lord's altar during the **"mystery of the**

people's absolution."

Ninth: The Doxologies, the Orthodox Creed and *Ephnoti Nai Nan*

The people who have been singing doxologies now recite the Orthodox Creed (of Faith), and the priest raises the cross with three candles **to ask for God's mercy** praying, **"have mercy upon us O God"** or **"*ephnoti nai nan*."**

Tenth: The Prayer for the Gospel

The priest says the **prayer of the Bible** as the deacon asks the people "pray for the Holy Bible." This is so that praise introduces a chapter from the Holy Bible, the suitable fruit, requiring the prayers of both the priest and the people.

Eleventh: The Gospel

Psalms are prayed in Coptic, while the priest puts one handful of incense goes around the altar with the deacon opposite him carrying the Gospel. The priest repeats the prayer of Simeon the Elder: **"Lord, now You are letting your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared before the face of peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."**

When he finishes going around the altar, the priest censes in front of the Holy Bible and presents the Gospel to the other clergy so that they may kiss It.

The deacon warns the people, **"Stand in the fear of God, and listen to the Holy Gospel."**

As the deacon asks the people to listen with divine fear when they hear the Divine Word, the priest in a joyful spirit praises God Who granted us His Word, the Gift of Victory. He offers triumphant praise to God, the "Lord of Hosts," Who through the Bible gives the faithful victory in their spiritual battle; he says, **"Bless is he Who comes in the Name of the Lord of Hosts."**

This resembles the praise which the people uttered when the Lord Christ entered Jerusalem... and it is as if upon hearing the Word of the Bible we are blessed by the entry of our Christ to our hearts, His beloved Jerusalem and His royal palace.

Twelvth: The Lesson (Sermon)

Learning in the church is fundamental for growth in spiritual knowledge for the clergy and lay people.

Thirteen: The Five Short Prayers

The priest prays at the door of the sanctuary the **five short prayers** for 1) peace, 2) the fathers, 3) the place, 4) the winds of heaven (or plants or water), and 5) the gatherings (congregation). Along with the prayers the priest censes so that the prayers mingle with the incense.

Fourteen: The Three Absolutions

The following should be noted in these absolutions:

1. In the first absolution, the priest asks for the heads of Satan to be crushed under our feet quickly (Revelation 16:20), because the enemy of good plans with his heads to possess us but we do not accept any king other than our Christ.
2. In the second absolution, the priest views the Divine Incarnation as the source of our inner peace (Isaiah 26:12) which was destroyed by sin.
3. In the second absolution, the priest asks for a fear of God that is full of eagerness for him, such that the fear of the divine is mixed with love.
4. The priest asks not only for absolution from sins but also that the faithful would be worthy of virtues appropriate for those who enjoy the kingdom of God through the pleasure of the Good Father.
5. The third absolution asks on behalf of the clergy and people for forgiveness of their weakness for the sake of His Holy Spirit Whom He granted to the church.

Fifteen: The Final Blessing

The **final blessing** is given from the merciful God Who blesses His children, and cares and elevates them forever, as well as through the intercessions of the heavenly beings and saints, especially the Mother of God, St. Mary. The priest ends it by addressing **"O Christ our God"** and the people reply, **"Amen, let it be so."**

Sixteen: The Royal Anthem

Before the people leave, the priest proclaims the **royal anthem**, which resembles a royal military anthem that is offered to the Lord Christ Who in every liturgy declares His kingdom in the hearts of His people.

**O King of Peace grant us Your peace,
establish for us Your peace,
and forgive us our sins**

For Yours is the power, the glory, the blessing and majesty forever. Amen.

Then the Lord's Prayer is said and the priest dismisses the people by saying "**Leave in peace; the Lord be with you all, Amen**" and the people repeat "**And with your spirit also.**"