

A Practical Guide for Becoming Orthodox

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Introduction

Welcome to "A Practical Guide For Orthodoxy!" This wiki is meant to briefly answer the frequently asked questions about the Coptic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Church at large, while also providing background for the Coptic Church's practices that may cause some confusion to catechumens and converts. Since this wiki is written from a Coptic Orthodox perspective it is important to clarify two points:

- a) The word "Coptic" in "Coptic Orthodox" describes the cultural and historical origins of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The word "Coptic" is derived from the Greek "Αἰγύπτιος" (*Aigýptios*) meaning "Egyptian." Coptic is the ancient language of Egypt and was the first language used in the Divine Liturgy in the first century. Coptic, as well as Greek, continues to be used in parts of our liturgies to this day. However, many churches have now adopted the vernacular language for almost all of the liturgy. The Coptic Church was established by St. Mark the Apostle in 43 AD, and today has expanded to become a universal church made up of people from many different cultures and backgrounds throughout the world.
- b) The Coptic Orthodox Church is among the Oriental Orthodox family of churches, and so most of the content in this wiki applies specifically to Oriental Orthodoxy, rather than Eastern Orthodoxy. The differences between Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy are beyond the scope of this guide. Therefore, whenever the term "Orthodoxy" is used, it refers to Oriental Orthodoxy.

What is Orthodoxy?

The Orthodox Church was established at the time of the Lord's apostles. The early church had five major centers located in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome. Each city was presided over by a bishop. The original church functioned as one with the bishops meeting frequently especially concerning issues of dogma. The Church at this time is often referred to as "pre-denominational" and it is here where the Orthodox Church has its roots. The Church of Alexandria is now referred to as the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Coptic Orthodox Church was established by St. Mark the evangelist, the writer of the second gospel and one of the 72 disciples referred to in XXX. He established the Church in 52AD and is considered the first Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Practicality of Orthodoxy

The Coptic Orthodox Church is part of the one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic church of God. A key characteristic of the Orthodox Church is to maintain the faith that was handed down to the apostles by Christ Himself. The Orthodox Church adheres to the Nicene Creed instituted at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. At this council St. Athanasius, the twentieth patriarch of the Coptic Church, played a critical role

in defending the Orthodox faith against heresy. St. Athanasius teaches that “Orthodoxy is what Christ taught, the apostles preached, and the fathers kept.”

The Orthodox Church therefore has four key characteristics:

- a) **One** - There is only one faith, teaching, and doctrine.
 - i) “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called on one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:4-5).
- b) **Holy** - The church is set apart and sanctified by God.
 - i) “As Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be HOLY and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).
- c) **Catholic (universal)** - The church is universal and belongs to all believers throughout the world.
- d) **Apostolic** - The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ Himself as the true cornerstone.

The Orthodox Christian

Before we speak about the Orthodox Church at large, it is important to discuss what it means to be an Orthodox Christian. In this section we'll discuss catechism (the process of becoming a Christian) and general life as an Orthodox Christian.

Catechism

Catechism is the process of preparation by which an adult, not born into the faith, becomes a member of the Church. This preparation includes attending the Divine Liturgy, education in the faith, rites and traditions of the Church, learning the differences between Christianity and other religions, having one-on-one meetings with a priest regarding the transition, and ultimately the sacrament of baptism.

Classes

To become a member in the Church, catechumens must be baptized. However, before baptism catechumens take classes on the basic principles of the Church's theology and practices. They also attend Bible studies and liturgies in order to participate in all aspects of church life.

Baptism

When a catechumen is ready to join the faith, they are baptized. To prepare for baptism, catechumens fast from all food and drink from midnight of the night before their baptism until after partaking of their first communion. This communion occurs at the Divine Liturgy on the same day as their baptism. During the sacrament of baptism, the priest blesses the waters to prepare it for the baptized person. The catechumen dresses in a white tunic, and the priest immerses them in the water three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). They are given a new baptismal name to represent their spiritual rebirth, and they become full members of the Orthodox Church which is the Body of Christ.

Immediately after their baptism, they then attend their first liturgy. As new converts, they are the first to receive communion. After the service is complete, they participate in a procession that is performed around the entire church to celebrate the second birth of a new member into the church family. Baptisms are joyous occasions where the entire church comes together and praises God for the new addition to the faith.

Life as an Orthodox Christian

Due to the Church's dedication to keeping an unaltered faith, the lives of Orthodox Christians across the world have remained largely unchanged for the past 2,000 years. Many of the practices observed today can be traced back to antiquity. They include regular participation in church services; daily personal

prayer, as well as prayer using the Coptic Book of Hours (Agpeya); regular confession; daily Scripture reading; dedication to education, service, and almsgiving; fasting; sharing the faith with others; adhering to a strict moral code; and constant spiritual renewal through the Church Sacraments, the Holy Mysteries. Through these practices, Orthodox Christians for generations have become united with God and have experienced lives filled with peace and hope, even amidst great persecution.

Our Creed

In this section we will outline the origins of the Creed, as it is the core declaration that describes the faith of an Orthodox Christian. Then we will address four essential practices in the life of an Orthodox Christian.

In the Orthodox Church, our Creed is both a prayer and a proclamation that we declare multiple times each day as a reminder and a hope of the things to come. Since the time of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ until today, the Orthodox Church has lived to uphold the same, unchanged apostolic faith that Christ preached to his apostles and their disciples. Using the interpretations and writings of the early church fathers, the Orthodox Church has protected and maintained the same faith for the past 2,000 years. This unchanged doctrine of faith has been challenged often through the ages. At every service, the Church reminds its believers of this proclamation of the faith, and also of the sacrifices its believers made to keep it.

Origin of the Creed

Early in church history, there were disagreements in some matters of the faith. To reach agreement and prevent incorrect theology, the early Church held ecumenical (universal) councils to clarify, strengthen, and unify the Church, and to fend off heresies that had potential to fundamentally change the faith.

The Nicene Creed is a direct result of the first ecumenical council that occurred in the year 325 AD. At this ecumenical council, now known as the council of Nicea, Arius and his followers argued that Christ was created by the Father and therefore not equal to God the Father. This issue led the council to create what is now known as the Nicene Creed to emphasize that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal with one another.

The Nicene Creed was the first, but not final, form of the Creed that we use today. In subsequent councils additions were made to combat other heresies, to emphasize the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, and to clarify the importance of St. Mary as the Theotokos (Mother of God). The final form of the Creed is now known as the Orthodox Creed.

The Orthodox Creed

The Orthodox Creed is as follows:

Introduction to the Creed

We exalt you, the mother of the true Light. We glorify you, O saint, the Theotokos (Mother of God), for you brought forth unto us the Savior of the whole world; He came and saved our souls.

Glory to You, our Master, Our King, Christ, the pride of the Apostles, the crown of the martyrs, the joy of the righteous, the firmness of the churches, the forgiveness of sins.

We proclaim the Holy Trinity in one Godhead. We worship Him. We glorify Him.

Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord bless. Amen

The Orthodox Creed

We believe in one God, God the Father the Pantocrator who created heaven and earth, and all things seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy spirit and the Virgin Mary and became Man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. And on the third day He rose from the dead, according to the scriptures, ascended to the heavens; He sits at the right hand of his Father, and He is coming again in His glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

Yes, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-Giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

And in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the coming age. Amen.

This creed defines the core dogmas of Orthodox Christianity. It is central to the Church's identity, and is the basis upon which the whole Church is established.

Discipleship

*"The Christian life is a life of discipleship. Everyone who believes in Christ, is called to be His disciple."
(Pope Shenouda - Discipleship)*

It is key for an Orthodox Christian to seek spiritual guidance and to have a spiritual guide to whom they are a disciple. The word "disciple" means a student or a follower. The Orthodox Christian understands that we are called to be disciples and to learn how to grow closer to Christ from those before us. In the Great Commission, our Lord commanded His disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Therefore, Christ intends to have discipleship as a key part in the growth of His Church. Newer generations learn from previous ones and grow stronger in spirit.

Father of Confession

Regular confession is a critical part of the life of an Orthodox Christian. Christ gave the apostles and all ordained clergy the authority to forgive and retain sins (John 20:23). While God is the only one who truly forgives sins, the priest declares the forgiveness of God to a repentant sinner after confession by praying an absolution on them. In addition to the absolution of sins, the sacrament of confession provides accountability to the believer to maintain a flourishing spiritual life.

A believer chooses a priest as a father of confession, to whom they confess their sins and seek guidance. The sacrament of confession is one of the key ways discipleship has continued in the Orthodox Church for the past 2,000 years. As a spiritual guide, the father of confession will usually give a spiritual rule for the believer to follow that may include praying certain prayers from the Book of Hours, fasting certain days of the week, making prostrations each morning, etc. With guidance from their father of confession, a believer draws nearer to Christ and learns how to handle and overcome many of their spiritual struggles.

Personal Prayer

Prayer is direct dialogue with God in which a person opens their heart to speak with Him. It is essential for the spiritual growth of a believer. We are called to pray to God without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). A prayer to God starts from the deepest part of the soul and is expressed in many ways. It can be shown by simple words of the mouth, by songs and hymns, by tears and joy, or by complete silence. While prayer can vary in its outward expression, prayer of the inward expression should always be performed in sincerity from the heart.

The Physical Aspects of Prayer

While prayer emanates from the heart, it can also be expressed physically with the body so that the whole being prays to God. A person prays continuously throughout their day. As Christians, we are not just spirit, but also flesh. Thus the flesh is also a part of the process of prayer in addition to opening one's heart to God. This is primarily seen in the way Orthodox Christians make the sign of the cross.

Signing of the Cross

During any mention of the Holy Trinity (The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) believers make the sign of the cross while praying. The signing of the cross starts and ends prayers, eases spirits during stressful situations, and protects from harm. An Orthodox Christian makes the sign of the cross very often in their daily life. The sign of the cross is done like so:

The sign of the cross starts at the forehead and goes down to the chest area, symbolizing Jesus coming down from Heaven (the head) to earth (chest). We then complete the cross by signing from left shoulder to right shoulder, symbolizing Christ bringing us from darkness to light. Alternatively, left to



right symbolizes moving from the goats (left) to the sheep (right) in reference to Matthew 25.

Raising of Hands

In addition to signing the cross, many faithful raise their hands during prayer such as when reciting the Lord's prayer ("Our Father...").

"Let my prayer be set before You *as* incense, The lifting up of my hands *as* the evening sacrifice."

(Psalm 141:2)

Prostration and Bowing

Prayer can include prostrations and bows. Often used in prayers reflecting repentance, prostrations show reverence and declare submission to God. Often times the Greek word "μετάνοια" (Metanoia) is used to describe a prostration. The word "metanoia" means to change in heart or to repent. The explanation behind prostrations exemplifies this repentance. By bending their knees and bowing their heads, believers acknowledge their sins with a spirit of humility. They recall the spiritual poverty of the human soul which is susceptible to the passions of lust, greed, anger, pride, and more. By rising to their feet following a prostration, the Christian acknowledges the saving grace of God and the repentance of their sins.

Prostrations are uncommon in western practice, but they are used often in the Orthodox faith. It is important to note that prostrations are only a method to deepen prayer life and express humility, rather than a legalistic means of achieving repentance itself. Prostrations without a repentant heart is of no value to the believer.

Facing the East

Whenever the church or an Orthodox individual prays, they make an effort to face east. Though there are many reasons for this, we'll mention the three most important ones.

1. We see Christ as our East in that the sun rises from the East. The sun is the source of our life and similarly, Christ is our salvation—the source of our life in the spirit. Without Him, we can not see the light for our path to heaven. He is our heavenly direction that we look to for guidance and support. His light will lead us to everlasting life if we choose to abide by life through Him.
2. During prayer, we direct our minds toward two important events that occurred in the east: Christ's crucifixion and ascension. We face Christ on the cross, acknowledging his sacrifice for us and looking to Him as our savior. Since we know that Christ will return in the east, we face the east awaiting His Second Coming: "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).
3. Lastly, by facing east we stand unified in prayer as one body. For centuries, all the Orthodox Christians around the world have together faced east as one church in solidarity. Every Orthodox Church is built facing the east so that believers will be facing east together during prayer.

The Book of Hours: “Agpeya”

Seven prayers recited at fixed hours of the day make up the Coptic Book of Hours, often referred to as the Agpeya. Each hour commemorates a significant event in our Lord Jesus Christ’s life. Every hour includes the Thanksgiving Prayer; Psalm 50; psalms, a gospel reading, and an absolution all specific to a given hour; a few additional prayers; and the concluding prayer. The Book of Hours aids a person’s prayer life and helps one to learn to pray. The majority of people pray the hours of the Agpeya according to the guidance of their father of confession. It is strongly recommended that a person consult with their father of confession before changing their spiritual practices, so that they do not burn out or become discouraged. Praying the Agpeya prayers is a teaching received from the apostolic and patristic fathers.

The Agpeya aids us in our prayer, and teaches us how to praise and glorify God. It gives us the words to pray when we have little to say. Instead of searching for words, we simply focus on the words that are given to us from the Holy Scripture. In this way it helps us to focus our minds on the Lord.

The Five Types of Prayer

“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men”

1 Timothy 2:1

There are five types of prayer. It is important to recognize all five of these types of prayer and to try to incorporate all five of these into personal prayers. All of these types of prayer are found in each hour of the Book of Hours and in the Church’s liturgical prayers.

- a) Thanksgiving – Giving thanks. Each prayer in the church starts with thanksgiving. We recognize God’s grace and offer thanks for all that our Lord has done for us. In the Book of Hours the first prayer is the Thanksgiving Prayer.
- b) Repentance – Forgiveness for our sins. The most common phrase in the liturgy is “Lord Have Mercy.” This phrase, although short, is a powerful prayer that the believer can use throughout their day. It is a clear example of a prayer of repentance.
- c) Praising – Worshipping and glorifying God. There are multiple services in the church which are completely dedicated to praising God: Midnight Praises and Vesper Praises. In addition, there are many forms of praise throughout the liturgical services such as Doxologies and other hymns.
- d) Supplication – Asking for something. It is very common to pray to God about problems, worries, and other concerns. This is a normal part of having a relationship with God. Even though God is all-knowing, it is important to share your heart’s concerns with Him.
 - i) “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” (1st John 5: 14)
- e) Intercession – Praying on the behalf of others. We both “pray for each other” (James 5:16) and we ask the saints and angels to pray for us. Through intercession the entire church grows closer to Christ and truly acts as one body.

Fasting

Fasting is a regular part of an Orthodox Christian's life. Fasting in the Orthodox tradition is described as a period of time where we voluntarily give up eating/drinking certain foods, such as meat and dairy products. We usually fast right before a feast so that when the feast day arrives, we all break our fast and celebrate together! This way, the joyful occasion can be fully appreciated by all the church. The fasts preceding these feasts vary in size and focus, depending on the feast to be celebrated. Fasts can be categorized as either level 1 or level 2. Level 1 fasts are done to prepare for the largest feast of the year, the Resurrection, and also on Wednesday and Fridays throughout the year. Level 1 fasts are observed by abstaining from all animal products (essentially becoming vegan). Level 2 fasts are done to prepare for smaller feasts and are observed by abstaining from all animal products with the exception of fish.

The Orthodox Church holds the tradition of fasting every Wednesday and Friday. As it is also considered a level 1 fast, we abstain from all animal products. We fast on Wednesdays to remember Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus and on Fridays to remember Jesus' crucifixion.

Fasting is a way to gain spiritual strength. It is a means of spiritual growth and not a goal in or of itself. Fasting incorporates many different practices and is not limited to abstinence from food. Ultimately, fasting is abstaining from indulgences, sin, and the frivolous things in this world. Fasting raises the mind and spirit toward the godly and away from the earthly. Similarly, St. Paul says, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Purpose of Fasting

Fasting is a spiritual exercise meant to edify the body, not simply to physically weaken it. When our souls are satisfied with God, the soul is elevated above the carnal desires. This is the goal we try to accomplish through abstinence. Fasting is an attempt to subdue and control the body and its desires. Often during times of non-fasting, we are easily controlled by our bodily desires. Fasting gives us the opportunity to keep our desires under our control so that we may learn to keep them as our servants and not our masters. By denying ourselves, we can more intently listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. In this way, we learn to do the perfect will of God, and not our own will.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise to be performed with other practices as well, such as prayer. The fasting periods of the church are often periods of increased prayer and focus upon the spiritual life.

Although the Orthodox church places a great importance on the benefits of fasting, oftentimes too much emphasis is placed on deciding which foods to eat and less on the spiritual benefits gained from it. Going to great lengths to find substitute foods we enjoy that are technically "fasting" defeats the very purpose of fasting: denying our bodily desires to strengthen our relationship with God.

Sacraments

Living as an Orthodox Christian also means living a sacramental life. Faithful Christians regularly partake of the Church's sacraments. For some this concept is a bit foreign, but sacraments are an ancient and core aspect of the Christian faith.

Meaning of Sacrament

A sacrament (or mystery) is the invisible work of the Holy Spirit accomplished through some visible physical action. It is through sacraments that the Holy Spirit works in the church and in each individual believer.

Importance of Sacraments

The Orthodox Church has seven sacraments: baptism, chrismation, confession, communion, priesthood, marriage, and unction of the sick. In each of these, the Holy Spirit works mystically to transform and sanctify the believers. The four essential sacraments for salvation are baptism, chrismation, confession, and communion. The sacraments of baptism and chrismation are practiced only once in the believer's life, while the sacraments of confession and communion should be practiced regularly.

These sacraments transform us through the grace of God and are like medicine for our souls. Through the physical water of baptism, we die and rise again with Christ. Through the application of the chrism (a special oil), also called Holy Myron, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of the living God. Through physical bread and wine, we partake of the precious Body and Blood of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ. Through the confession of sins, we are absolved from our sins by the hands of the priest.

Church Reverence

"One thing I have asked the Lord this also I will seek, that I dwell in the house of the Lord all my life, that I should behold the fair beauty of the Lord and visit his holy temple"

Psalm 26

The church is the center place of our worship, where the body and blood of our Lord is present on the altar during the Divine Liturgy. As such, the church is the most holy place and requires the highest degree of reverence. The following basic guidelines along with your own personal judgement should be considered to maintain the respect of this holy place.

While there is no mandatory dress code, no shorts, sleeveless shirts, or hats should be worn in church. Women should cover their heads as St. Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians. When entering the sanctuary to receive communion, shoes should not be worn as God instructed Moses, "take your sandals off your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). If you are not sure about something, please don't be afraid to ask and remember that the most important thing is to show modesty.

In the Orthodox Church you will find that we stand for the majority of the liturgy since we are in the presence of the Lord. If you are able, we encourage you to stand as we worship God together. Of course, sitting is okay for those who are unable. There are certain parts of the liturgy where the entire congregation should stand to the best of their ability: for example, during the Lord's prayer and communion.

We know the liturgy is long, but it is important to arrive at the beginning of the service to participate in the entire liturgy (including the morning raising of incense) as we prepare to receive the blessed sacrament of communion.

Finally, we should maintain the cleanliness of the church. This entails refraining from eating or drinking while in the church. This is all in an effort to maintain our reverence for this most holy place.

The Orthodox Church

Now that we've discussed the Orthodox Christian as an individual it is critical to describe the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church has three core characteristics we will discuss in this guide: liturgical, sacramental, and joyful. Since the Orthodox Church plays a crucial role in the life of the believers, it is important to discuss these three aspects.

A Liturgical Church - The Divine Liturgy

The first of the characteristics of the Orthodox Church is the liturgical aspect. The term "liturgy" means "work of the people." Although there are multiple services that can be considered "liturgies," here we refer specifically to the Divine Liturgy, the core service held by the church. The Divine Liturgy is the most important service in the church because it ends with the sacrament of communion, in which we reunite with the body of Christ and gain forgiveness of our sins¹. *Note: This section will not provide a breakdown of the Divine Liturgy itself, but will address the preparation, practices, roles, and hymnology related to the Divine Liturgy. Since the Orthodox Church has many different liturgical services that change throughout the year, we have dedicated a different section to discussing these services. This will be in the section labeled "Church Services" towards the end of the guide.

Preparation

The practices done before the liturgy and most of the liturgy itself prepare the congregation for the sacrament of communion. Attending the liturgy on Sunday in the Orthodox Church is the ultimate celebration of our faith. By taking part in it, we worship our God who loves us, take the Holy Eucharist of our God who died for us because of His love for us, and join in one Spirit with the fellowship of believers in profession of our faith. In the Orthodox tradition, preparing to attend church services is an important time to reflect on our thoughts and behavior to ensure we enter our Lord's house with the proper reverence and humility.

To prepare ourselves for a worthy acceptance of Christ's body and blood, we fast from all food and drink (including water) from midnight the previous night. In addition, the believer should be regularly practicing the sacrament of confession before partaking of the sacrament of communion.

Practices & Reverence

In addition to this preparation before church, there are many church traditions during the liturgy that are reminders for the believer. These are shared below.

¹ The sacrament of communion alone doesn't grant us the forgiveness of sins. refer to the Sacraments: Confession & Repentance section for further detail.

Incense

Incense is one of the clearest examples of a tradition that serves as both a meaningful symbol and a reminder for believers. Incense symbolizes the prayers that we offer up to God, and it is a reminder of the presence of the saints and the heavenly among us during the liturgical services. The traditional use of incense is not a pagan ritual; rather, it finds its source in the Bible: "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 is before the throne" (Revelations 8:3). Incense is raised during Vespers and Matins before every liturgy² and during the Divine Liturgy itself. Vespers is the raising of incense service that occurs the night before a liturgy. Matins is the raising of incense service that occurs directly preceding the liturgy. The raising of incense service is an introduction and preparation for the liturgy, consisting of a collection of praises and thanksgiving prayers which request the Lord's blessings upon the sacramental service.

Greet One Another

The holy kiss is another practice that serves as a reminder, but also as a warning. It occurs at the beginning of the "Liturgy of the Believers," which is the second half of the liturgy. Shortly after the congregation reads the Creed the deacon says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." This is said during a prayer known as the "Prayer of Reconciliation." Greeting one another with a holy kiss is meant to be a reminder that we must be reconciled with everyone in our lives before partaking of the Eucharist. As Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). When the deacon says the phrase, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," the entire congregation begins to make a gesture with those around them. To make this gesture, hold your palms flat against each other with your fingers extended and together. Point your hands towards the person you wish to greet with the holy kiss. As you approach him/her, separate your palms and place your hands in between the other's separated hands. Then slide your hands back to yourself and return them to the original palms-together position. To complete the gesture, bring your hands (still together) to your lips and kiss the side of your index fingers. Repeat with each person you wish to greet.

Prostrations

During the liturgy there are certain times when the congregation bows. This is known as a "prostration." Oftentimes this is a gesture of reverence to whatever is happening at that moment in the liturgy. The proper way to prostrate is to kneel down and kiss the ground (if you are in the church, since the ground of the church is holy) as a sign of reverence before the altar or the bishop. The altar is the dwelling of the Lord, and the bishop is the Lord's representative on earth. In prayers, we prostrate as a sign of humility before the Lord as we ask Him to have mercy on us.

² There are some liturgies which do not have vespers such as night-festal liturgies and weekday liturgies during Lent.

Liturgical Roles

There are three main groups with different roles in the liturgical services: the priests (and bishops), the deacons, and the congregation.

The Bishops & Priests

During the liturgy the priest has two key roles: interceding for the congregation and preparing the Eucharist through many prayers and practices. The priest performs many symbolic and meaningful actions, but it is beyond the scope of this guide to detail each action of the priest. The key thing to note is that the priest prays constantly while preparing the Eucharist according to the practices passed down by the Church.

The Deacons

The majority of deacons in the Coptic Church are of the ranks “Psaltos” (Chanter) and “Oghnostos” (Reader). The deacons who serve in the Sanctuary have many roles. The most visible role these deacons have is to instruct the congregation. This may be to pray for something (e.g. the Litanies) or to do something (e.g. the Holy Kiss). The majority of deacons during a liturgical service stand outside with the congregation and act as part of the congregation. A few of these deacons will read the readings during the Liturgy of the Word, but their main role is to lead and be to part of the congregation, chanting hymns and glorifying God.

The Congregation

The last group to discuss is the congregation. There is often a misconception that the congregation doesn't play a key part in the liturgy. This is definitely not the case. The word liturgy literally means “the work of the people.” The congregation is constantly being called to pray, chant, and lift their hearts to God. In the liturgy the congregation signifies the unified body of Christ. By chanting hymns and prayers together in one voice, the members of the congregation draw closer to God and thus one other, as a whole acting as the unified body of Christ.

Liturgical Hymns

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (James 5:13).

Music is a key part of worship and is very prominent in the Church's liturgical services. From the hymns in Midnight Praises to the chants and hymns of the liturgical service itself, the many hymns in the Church services help the believers elevate their hearts and worship their Creator.

Purpose

St. Basil the Great once said: "the work of praising attracts the service of the angels, because it is a part of their work, and they become attached to those who share in their service."

The main purpose of hymns is to help elevate the spirit of the believers and to worship God in the process. There are many hymns, such as the hymns in Midnight Praises, which were used as a means to pass down the Church's faith and beliefs. These hymns both help us to praise God and to confirm what we believe and know from the Church's doctrine. In addition to hymns that teach theology, there are also hymns which express the current mood of the church. The church has numerous seasons celebrating and commemorating many different events. As such, the melodies and words of hymns change throughout the year to reflect these seasons. For example, during Holy Week the tune is solemn compared to the much more joyful tunes for the liturgy of the feast of the Resurrection.

In the Coptic Church, many of the hymnal tunes originated from early Coptic culture. Although this is not true for all hymns, many of the long tunes and Coptic hymns can be traced back to ancient Egyptian music.

A Sacramental Church - The Seven Sacraments

As an apostolic church, the Orthodox Church continues to practice the seven sacraments that our Lord Jesus Christ established during his time here on earth. Four of these sacraments are required for salvation, as our Lord Jesus Christ has instructed us: baptism, confirmation, confession, and communion. The other three of the church sacraments are not required for salvation, but are still works of the Holy Spirit which are manifested to us through a physical action. All seven of the sacraments are spiritual mysteries which are physically manifested to us. For example, baptism's spiritual manifestation is that a person has died with Christ and is now risen with Christ, and its physical manifestation is immersion in water three times. All of the sacraments of the Church are performed by either priests or bishops--except the ordination into the priesthood, which only the bishop can perform.

Baptism

Baptism is the first of the four sacraments that are required for salvation. Baptism happens directly before the sacrament of Chrismation, and both of these sacraments are only performed once in the believer's life. The Bible is clear on the necessity of baptism of believers. Christ says to Nicodemus, "Most assuredly I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). From the beginning, the Church has recognized the "water" to be the water of baptism and the "Spirit" to be the Holy Spirit. The sacrament of baptism is the first sacrament a believer will partake in. Through baptism, the believer becomes part of the Church and is given the right to partake of the rest of the sacraments. The key purpose of baptism is to wash away original sin.

Baptism & Resurrection

Through baptism, we are born again by being immersed in water three times in the name of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through baptism we die with Christ in his crucifixion, are born again with Him in His resurrection, and the consequences of the original sin are taken away. Through baptism we are united to the body of Christ in His death and resurrection.

Age of Baptism

The Orthodox Church believes that infants are born with original sin. Since we are concerned about their eternal life (John 3:5), we can not prevent children from being baptized and expose them to God's judgment.

Although many Christians are baptized in their infancy, there are many believers who are baptized later in life. "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This is meant for adults who are capable of understanding the significance of faith and who choose to be baptized when they believe.

Renouncing Satan

One of the first of the baptismal prayers is the renouncing of Satan. Renouncing Satan means that we break the covenant with him. This covenant is our obedience to him, and it is inherited as part of the original sin. To renounce Satan means to refuse to remain under his bondage, and so to refuse all his profane deeds, his plans and deluding tricks, his deceit, and his deadly lies.

Facing the west and then to the east when renouncing Satan has a significant meaning. The one who leaves the direction of the west and turns towards the east proves that he hates and renounces sin and its darkness, and instead yearns for the holiness and light granted in baptism. He turns towards a new, pure life renewed day by day according to the image of his Creator. He who faces the east proves that he seeks the first heavenly life, because the first paradise planted by God was a garden eastward in Eden (Genesis 2:8).

After the Baptism

Wearing white following the baptism symbolizes being born again and united with Christ. The red ribbon wrapped around the baptized following baptism symbolizes salvation through the blood of Christ. Baptisms usually occur during or before the liturgy. After the liturgy there is a procession. During this procession, the baptized goes around the church and then stands before the altar. Then the priest says a concluding prayer, the deacons chant "Axios (Worthy)" three times, and the red ribbon is taken off.

Chrismation

Chrismation happens immediately after baptism. It is the process of anointing the baptized with the Chrism (also known as the Holy Myron) in order to give them the Holy Spirit. Whereas baptism is for atonement of the original sin, chrismation is for the believer to receive the Holy Spirit within them.

Chrismation & Salvation

“Whoever is baptized should be anointed by myron, to become the anointed for God, and so is granted the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

(St. Cyprianus)

Chrismation, or the anointing of the chrism (also known as myron), is the equivalent of the apostles' laying of hands on the believers. The Bible mentions the apostles laying hands on the baptized to give them the Holy Spirit: “Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:17). With the growth of the church, it was not plausible for the apostles (the bishops of the time of Christ) to go and lay hands on every person who was baptized. Thus the chrism was made so that priests could perform this sacrament and give the baptized the Holy Spirit without the physical presence of a bishop. Although bishops can give the baptized the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, they still opt to use the chrism to avoid confusing the congregation.

Chrismation & The Chrism

The holy chrism is also often known as the “holy myron.” This tradition of using sacred oil goes back to the Old Testament in the book of Exodus (30:22-32) when God ordered Moses to prepare an anointing oil of myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, and sweet calamus mixed with pure olive oil. This oil was used to anoint kings, priests, the tent of the tabernacle, and its furniture. The chrism has been made several times and has a special service that involves mixing previous chrism with several other components to make additional chrism. The chrism originally came from the spices and fragrances that anointed the body of Christ after His burial.

When using the chrism, the priest anoints the baptized in 36 places, including several joints and the senses. After the anointing of the chrism, the anointed becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. By this anointment, God grants the grace of confirmation to the baptized as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Anointing the external organs with the myron oil denotes anointing the power of the internal soul and its spiritual senses with the power of God to fight the hosts of evil. This is because the Holy Spirit is the most powerful weapon against the devil and the best protection against sin and its seduction.

Repentance & Confession

The sacrament of repentance and confession is needed for salvation. This sacrament is often referred to as just confession. This sacrament is the means by which the sinner returns to God after confessing his sins before a priest. With the authority granted to him by God, the priest absolves the sinner. Sincere

repentance should always precede confession. The absolution at the end of confession grants the believer the forgiveness of the sins they confessed. Our Lord Jesus Christ founded the sacrament of repentance and confession when He said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Thus Christ gave His apostles the authority to forgive sins of the people through the sacrament of confession.

Repentance & Confession

Confession means admitting and declaring a certain matter. The sacrament of confession means humbly repenting and verbally confessing before the priest one's sins and mistakes in order to be granted the absolution and forgiveness.

Repentance should be offered prior to confession. There are four components to true repentance:

1. Contrite heart and remorse for previous sins.
2. Steadfast intention to improve.
3. Strong faith in Christ and hope in His love to forgive.
4. Verbal confession of sins before the priest.

The Act of Confession

Confession is done face to face with your spiritual father of confession who must be an ordained priest of the Orthodox Church. Confession remains confidential between you and the priest and is a means for spiritual growth. The priest often gives spiritual guidance during confession. The Orthodox Church grants all priests the same sacrament of confession, to pronounce God's absolution of sins. In this sacrament of forgiveness of sins, the repentant sinner confesses his sins to the Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of the priest. Refer to John 20:22-23 and 1 John 1:9.

Communion

Communion is another one of the four sacraments needed for salvation. Communion is the partaking of the body and blood of Christ which are manifested in the bread and wine that are prayed on during the liturgy. The pattern of the Orthodox holy communion is derived from Christ's practices during the Last Supper. For example, during communion the body is given first and then the blood. During the Last Supper, Christ "took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you' " (Luke 22:19-20). The baptized should partake of their first Communion in the liturgy immediately following their baptism, even for infants, since they have just received the Holy Spirit in baptism.

Communion & Salvation

Christ is clear about the necessity of Communion in the Christian's life: "Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him' " (John 6:53-56).

Communion as a Living Remembrance

Regarding communion, Christ said, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). This means much more than communion is just a memory, however. The Greek word for "remembrance" is ἀνάμνησιν (anamnēsin). This is more than a mere memory, but a living remembrance. The bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ exactly as Christ said in the Last Supper.

The Role of the Priest in Communion

During the Divine Liturgy, the serving priest who sanctifies the sacrifice is completely responsible for it before God, just like the cherubim with a fiery sword that God appointed at the eastern side of Eden is responsible for guarding the way to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:24). The sword in the priest's hand is the authority of priesthood given to him by God to give communion to the worthy, penitent believer, and to forbid it from those who are unworthy.

Worthily Partaking of Communion

"No one proceed to the Holy Communion with laziness or negligence, but let all go to receive it with enthusiasm and preparation so that we may not be punished. Do not be guilty of His Body and Blood as those who crucified Him."

(St. John Chrysostom)

Communion occurs at the end of the Divine Liturgy. For believers to partake of communion, they must partake of it in a worthy manner as St. Paul warns us: "So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1st Corinthians 11:27).

What does preparing for holy communion in worthiness mean? Worthiness is feeling unworthy and sinful, and knowing that the holies are for the holy person, and that no person has reached this holiness but struggles to attain it. Even if the person is contrite, repentant, and confesses, they must believe in what our teacher St. Paul said: "For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this" (1st Corinthians 4:4).

In addition, the Church advises the faithful to observe the following practices in order to ensure that they are partaking of communion in a worthy manner:

- a) Be baptized and chrismated.
- b) Regularly practice the sacrament of confession.
- c) Have no grudges against anyone in their life.
- d) Fast since midnight the night before. (With the exception of certain night festal liturgies which require just nine hours of fasting before the liturgy)
- e) Come early to the Divine Liturgy to hear the readings, especially the Holy Gospel.

Partaking of Communion

The believers who do partake of communion at the end of the Divine Liturgy will line up on their side when it is their turn to take communion. It is important to note the following:

- a) Since the bread is consecrated and the priest is the chosen and appointed leader of the church, he is the only one that can give us the Body of Christ. He does so by breaking it into a small piece and placing it in your mouth. Next, the Blood is given with a spoon that you sip from.

- i) What happens if the Body falls out of your mouth (or your child's), or if Blood drips from your mouth?

Since the Body of Christ is consecrated and sacred, if bread falls on the floor the priest is the only one who can pick it up and put it back in your mouth. The Blood of Christ is similarly consecrated and sacred, so if it drips down your chin the priest must wipe it with his finger and partake of it himself. If the blood drips onto clothes, the person must burn that piece of clothing or give it to the priest to take care of.

- b) Do: We should take off our shoes to partake of communion. Only cover your mouth with the handkerchief after the body. Drink water from the provided small cups immediately after partaking of the Blood.
 - c) Don't: Females can not take communion when on their menstrual cycle. Do not cover your mouth with the handkerchief following the blood; the blood should not touch any piece of clothing or fabric.

Unction of the Sick

The sacrament of the unction of the sick heals psychological and physical diseases through faith. The priest anoints a person with holy oil. The service for the unction of the sick, which includes prayers, provides healing for the soul. This in turn cures bodily ailments. Since the soul and body are so strongly linked, if the soul is sick, the body will likewise suffer. For this reason, the Church always asks her children to first repent from their sins to heal their souls and spirits. When our Lord Jesus Christ healed the lame man at Bethsaida who had been sick for thirty-eight years, He said to him, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (John 5:14).

Unction of the Sick & Faith

“If anyone among you is sick, let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:13,14).

Professional Help

There is nothing wrong with seeking a doctor when a person is sick. However, it is also vital that a priest is called so he can perform the unction of the sick. The power of faith should not be underestimated, because God never abandons those who hope in Him.

Marriage

The sacrament of marriage, or matrimony, is one of the seven holy sacraments. In this sacrament, one man and one woman are united and become one. As our Lord Jesus Christ said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:5-6).

The Crowning Ceremony

The Church calls the wedding ceremony “The Crowning Ceremony.” Since marriage is a sacrament, the crowning ceremony has to be officiated by an Orthodox priest, because he alone has the authority from God to carry it out. The crowning ceremony is composed of required canonical prayers which call on God’s Spirit to bless the bride and groom and to sanctify their union. Everything in the ceremony is meaningful, from the repetition of the signing of the cross and the beautiful hymns, to the crowning of the bride and groom as a symbol of kingship and queenship over a new kingdom: their home.

Monogamy & Divorce

Christianity insists on monogamy, for in the beginning God created male and female, one Adam and one Eve. Through matrimony the two become one in Christ. They are no longer two but one body. Man and woman are unified with Christ. The Orthodox church believes this union to be permanent. There are very few cases where divorce is allowed, for Christ Himself said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9). The only three reasons for which the Church allows divorce are:

- a) Adultery - divorce is permitted if a strange person has entered the unity of marriage and profaned its holiness. However, if the person who sinned repented and the partner forgives them, then the Church permits the continuation of the marriage.
- b) Physical Abuse - if one of the partners in the marriage is in physical danger, then the Church allows that person to leave the marriage for their safety.
- c) Spiritual Immorality - denial of faith and abandonment of Christianity by one of the partners.

Priesthood

The final sacrament is the sacrament of priesthood. Unlike the other six sacraments, a bishop is required because only bishops may ordain priests. Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted this sacrament when He chose His twelve disciples and consecrated them for ministry (Luke 6:13). He gave them the authority of absolving and binding sins (as during the sacrament of confession): "Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Christ also gave them the authority to perform the other five sacraments.

In the Orthodox Church priesthood is a divine calling and divine choice. Priests are appointed and selected, meaning that a servant is recommended for the priesthood because of his good manners, successful service, and good deeds. He should also be knowledgeable of the doctrine, meek, comforting, merciful, and married (according to the Law of the Holy Gospel).

Ranks of the Priesthood

The priesthood encompasses more than just priests. In fact, there are three ranks of the priesthood: deacons (the servants), priests (the teachers), and bishops (the overseers and shepherds).

Customs of the Priesthood

Priests are addressed as "Father" or "Abouna," which is "father" in Arabic. Bishops are addressed as "Sayedna," which means "Master" or "Teacher."

The hand of the priest is an instrument for imparting the Divine Grace, as through the prayers offered by the priest the Holy Spirit changes bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The priest's hands distribute the holy Body and Blood bestows a special sanctity upon Christians imparting Divine Grace. Therefore, whenever approaching a priest or bishop it is traditional to kiss their hand. This tradition has endured for centuries in Eastern Christendom and shows paternal respect and affection.

Priests usually wear a large cross, black clothing, and a round hat. Priests do not shave their beards. The black clothing symbolizes that they are dead to the world. Orthodox monks and bishops follow this custom as well.

A Joyous Church - Church Seasons

A key characteristic of the Orthodox Church is its joyfulness. The Orthodox Church has many different seasons commemorating important events in history. Most of them occur in our Lord Jesus Christ's life. Most notably, we celebrate 14 feasts relating to our Lord Jesus Christ every year. Seven of these feasts are known as "Major Feasts of the Lord" and directly relate to our salvation as Orthodox Christians. The other seven are known as "Minor Feasts of the Lord." Although these Minor feasts don't directly contribute to our salvation, they remind us of important events in our Lord Jesus Christ's life. Periods of fasting occur before many of these feasts to prepare us to worthily celebrate these events with our Lord.

One of the best examples of this is Great Lent and Holy Week, which prepare us for our Lord’s Resurrection. Many of the major feasts and fasts shift yearly. The charts in each of the following sections will help to indicate these shifts. In addition, the congregation observes several other yearly fasts and feasts. These will be discussed towards the end of this section.

You may find a full calendar for the church seasons for any year between 2000 and 2100 [here](#).

The Major Feasts of the Lord

Church Seasons A Joyous Church - Major Feasts of the Lord		Legend																							
		Fixed Date												Shifting Date (Range)											
FEAST NAME	FEAST DATE	January				February				March				April				May				June			
		17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	41	42	43	44
Nativity Feast	January 7th																								
Theophany Feast	January 19th																								
Annunciation Feast	April 7th																								
Hosanna Sunday	Sunday before Resurrection																								
Resurrection	Shifts Yearly																								
Ascension Feast	Resurrection + 40 Days																								
Pentecost Feast	Resurrection + 50 Days																								

The major feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ commemorate important events in our Lord’s life that directly relate to our salvation. The Nativity Feast, Theophany Feast, and Annunciation Feast do not change yearly. However, the feasts of Hosanna Sunday, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost do shift yearly.

Annunciation Feast

The Annunciation Feast commemorates Archangel Gabriel announcing the news of Christ’s incarnation to St. Mary. This feast is celebrated on April 7 every year. Depending on the date of Holy Week, we may not celebrate the feast of the Annunciation every year.

Nativity Feast

The Nativity Feast commemorates the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate this feast after forty-three days of fasting. Three of the days of this fast commemorate the splitting of the Mokattam mountain. The remaining forty days are very symbolic. For example, they symbolize the fasts of Moses and Elijah. Moses fasted for forty days before receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34), just as we fast forty days before commemorating the incarnation of the Logos (the "Word"). Similarly, Elijah fasted forty days before the Lord's revelation to Elijah (1st Kings 19). The Nativity Feast is one of the three feasts where we pray the liturgy at night on the eve of the feast. Additionally, the day(s) preceding the feast are observed with a Paramoun or "preparation" fast.

Theophany Feast

The Theophany Feast, also known as the Epiphany Feast, commemorates the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the three feasts where we pray the liturgy at night on the eve of the feast. The Theophany Feast is also one of the three times in the year where we pray the "Liturgy of the Waters" (or Laqqan). The days preceding this feast, we prepare ourselves with a Paramoun or "preparation" fast.

Hosanna Sunday

On the feast of Palm Sunday, also known as Hosanna Sunday, we commemorate the entry of our Lord Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. This day marks the beginning of Holy Week and of our Lord's passions. We celebrate our Lord Christ's entry into Jerusalem as a king. At the end of Hosanna Sunday we pray a general funeral prayer on the entire congregation, since there are no dedicated funeral prayers during Holy Week. During Holy Week, our focus should be on the Lord alone.

Resurrection Feast

On the Feast of the Resurrection, often referred to as Easter, we commemorate our Lord's resurrection from death on the third day. This feast marks the beginning of the Holy Fifty Days where we celebrate our Lord's resurrection and His presence among the apostles and disciples. Jesus says, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" (Mark 2:19). As such, during the Holy Fifty Days we do not fast at all--even the standard Wednesday and Friday fasts.

Ascension Feast

We celebrate the Feast of the Ascension on the fortieth day of the Holy Fifty Days. This feast commemorates our Lord Christ's ascension at the Mount of Olives. Between this feast and the Feast of the Pentecost we often mention our Lord's promise of the Paraclete, or the Holy Spirit, in seasonal hymns.

Feast of our Lord's Entry into the Temple

The Feast of our Lord's Entry into the Temple marks the time when St. Mary and St. Joseph came to the temple with our Lord Jesus Christ. This occurred after St. Mary's days of purification to offer a burnt sacrifice and thanksgiving, according to Jewish law.

Covenant Thursday

Covenant Thursday celebrates the institution of the Eucharist by our Lord Jesus Christ. This happens in the middle of Holy Week, and thus is on a different day each year.

Thomas Sunday

Thomas Sunday celebrates Christ's appearance to St. Thomas a week after His resurrection.

Entry of our Lord into Egypt

The feast of our Lord's entry into Egypt marks when St. Mary and St. Joseph entered Egypt to escape from Herod, who murdered all infants under two years old.

Transfiguration Feast

The Feast of the Transfiguration celebrates Christ's transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ and spoke with Him before three of Christ's apostles.

Other Feasts

In addition to the feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ, we celebrate other feasts. Some of these are celebrated multiple times a year.

Nayrouz Feast

The Nayrouz Feast celebrates the Coptic New Year. This occurs on September 11 on regular years and September 12 on leap years.

Feast of the Cross

The Feast of the Cross occurs twice a year and commemorates events relating to the Cross. In both of these feasts we remember and take pride in the Cross, for through His crucifixion Christ granted us salvation. The first of these feasts is on March 19 and marks the day when Queen Helen found the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second feast is on September 27 and marks the consecration of the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem.

Apostles' Feast

On July 12 of every year we celebrate the Feast of the Apostles immediately after the Apostles' Fast which starts the day after Pentecost. The Apostles' Feast is fixed on this date, because this day commemorates the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul.

St. Mary's Feast

We celebrate the assumption of St. Mary's body on August 22 each year. This feast marks the end of St. Mary's Fast, in which we contemplate the life of St. Mary. St. Mary's Fast is often referred to as "the Revival."

Saint's Feasts (Veneration)

Almost daily in the Coptic Church, there are feasts of saints that are read in the Synaxarium and may be celebrated by additional hymns during the liturgical services. For certain saints, such as St. Mary or the saint of a church, that church may hold a Veneration service during Vespers as a celebration of that saint's life.

Church Fasts

In addition to the numerous feasts of the Church, there are many fasts. The Orthodox Church fasts over 200 days of the year. It is important to mention that the term "fast" doesn't mean strict abstinence from sunrise to sunset. Fasting differs for each individual with the guidance of their spiritual father.

Wednesdays & Fridays

Every Wednesday and Friday throughout the year is a fast (except during the Holy Fifty Days after the Feast of the Resurrection) in which we remember Christ's betrayal crucifixion. These days often include abstinence for a set period of time (again, according to the guidance of a spiritual father) and a vegan diet.

Nativity Fast & Kiahk

The Nativity Fast takes place in the 43 days before the Nativity Feast. Forty of these days symbolize the forty days that Moses and Elijah fasted. The other three days commemorate the fast before the Miracle of the Mokattam Mountain (literally, the Split Mountain).

Jonah's Fast

Jonah's Fast lasts three days and occurs two weeks before Lent. Many people suggest reading the book of Jonah during this fast.

Great Lent

Lent is the longest fasting season of the Church and also one of the most well-known and observed fasts. Lent is fifty-five days long and ends immediately before Holy Week. This period of fasting is a time where the Church urges believers to seriously reflect on their lives and repent. This season is viewed as a season of penance to prepare the congregation for Holy Week and the Feast of the Resurrection.

Holy Week

Holy Week directly precedes the Resurrection and starts the night of Palm Sunday. This time of fasting is the most sacred time of year. During Holy Week, there are special prayers for each part of the day. There are also multiple services each day that follow all of the events in our Lord Jesus Christ's life in the week leading up to His crucifixion.

Apostles' Fast

The Apostles' Fast starts the day after the Feast of the Pentecost and ends on July 12 each year. This is a season that is often dedicated to serving others and following the example of the apostles.

St. Mary's Fast

St. Mary's Fast begins on August 7 each year and ends August 22, which is the Feast of the Assumption of St. Mary's body. These two weeks are a time to reflect on the life of St. Mary and other saints. This fast is known as "the Revival."

Paramoun Fasts

Paramoun fasts are dedicated days of fasting that directly precede three major feasts: the Nativity, Theophany, and Resurrection Feasts. The Paramoun may last multiple days depending on the day of the week the feast occurs. Since the Paramoun should be observed with abstinence, the Paramoun includes all of the days up to the feast starting from the closest day where abstinence is allowed. Since abstinence-fasting is not allowed on Saturday or Sunday, if one of these feasts fall on Monday, then Friday through Sunday becomes the Paramoun fast. These days of fasting prepare the believer to partake of communion and celebrate the present feast.

Church Services

Our church has many services ranging from liturgical worship to fellowship meetings. There is no membership needed to attend any of these events. It is important to note that one must be baptized and chrismated before partaking of the following five sacraments of the Church: communion, the unction of

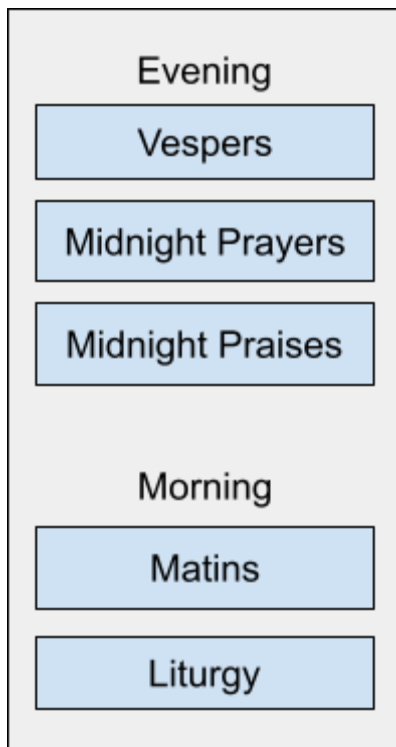
the sick, confession, marriage, and priesthood. However, to attend one of these sacraments without partaking of them is completely fine if you haven't been baptized. We'll divide the different services of the church into two main categories: fellowship and liturgical.

Fellowship Services

There are many services in the church which are not liturgical and are mainly for fellowship and growth. Everyone is encouraged to attend these events, but they certainly are not required. Some examples of fellowship meetings are Bible studies, youth meetings, and retreats.

Liturgical Services

This section will address the many different rituals/services of the Orthodox Church. First, we'll discuss the standard liturgical services which are held for the majority of the year. We will then discuss the different seasonal services of the Church that take place for portions of the year. These seasonal services include extensions of the standard liturgical services, as well as unique structures and tunes.



Standard Liturgical Services

Standard liturgical services occur almost daily throughout the year. To the left, an image depicts the general order of these services. Typically the night before a liturgy there is the Vespers service, midnight prayers and praises. The morning of the liturgy there is Matins service followed by the liturgy itself. The services of the previous night are strongly linked to the services of the morning, because the church day begins at 6 pm the preceding day according to the words in Genesis: "And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day" (Genesis 1:5). The Antiphony exemplifies this connection between the previous night's services and those of the next day. The Antiphony is read during Midnight Praises the night before and speaks about the same saints that are mentioned in the Synaxarium during the liturgy. All churches have liturgies on Sundays. Most churches have multiple liturgies during the week depending on the logistics of the congregation. Churches will often have liturgies on Wednesdays and Fridays since those are days we fast each week.

Raising of Incense

Vespers and Matins are both known as "Raising of Incense." Vespers is prayed the night preceding the liturgy and matins is prayed right before the liturgy. The matins service usually is the first thirty minutes of the liturgical service. Depending on the time of year and occasion, prayers are made for the traveling,

the sick, particular patrons of the church, etc. Since it is the earliest part of the service, it is also usually the emptiest part. However, the faithful who wish for quiet and peace experience a full immersion in the mysteries and beauty of our God when they attend matins.

Midnight Prayers and Praises

After vespers there is Midnight Prayers, a part of the Book of Hours, or Agpeya. The Agpeya prayers are followed by the Midnight Praises, which last about two hours. Although these services are labeled "midnight," they are usually done either the evening before a liturgy or early the morning of a liturgy. Some monasteries perform Midnight Praises around 4 am directly preceding a liturgy. Midnight Praises, often referred to as "Tasbeha," is a service which contains a great deal of melodic praises with biblical origins. Hymns include what the Israelites sang during their escape from Egypt, and the hymn of the three saintly youth who were thrown in the furnace by Nebuchadnezzar. Midnight Praises consists of an introductory hymn, four canticles, doxologies, one to two psalms, a multi-part "Theotokia," and concluding hymns. The "Theotokia" praises St. Mary for her virtuous life, and it refers to the many symbols of her in the Old Testament. This name comes from the Greek "Θεοτόκος" or "God-Bearer," which describes St. Mary as the mother of God.

The Liturgy

There are generally three parts in a standard liturgy in the Orthodox tradition. These are the Offering of the Lamb, the Liturgy of the Word, and the Liturgy of the Faithful. The Offering of the Lamb begins the liturgy and is the part where the Lamb is chosen for the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Faithful, communion is distributed. There are three versions of the standard liturgy: the Liturgy of St. Basil, the Liturgy of St. Gregory, and the Liturgy of St. Cyril. These three versions differ in that each has different prayers during the Liturgy of the Faithful section, but the general idea and structure are similar.

Offering of the Lamb

The Offering of the Lamb is the first and shortest part of the liturgy. The Offering of the Lamb begins with the priests and deacons putting on their vestments. After they have put on their vestments, a few hours from the Book of Hours are prayed. These prayers vary depending on the season of the Church. After these prayers the priest chooses the Lamb. The priest stands at the door of the Sanctuary and chooses one bread out of several to be the Lamb. The bread from which the priest chooses to be the Eucharist is known as "korban." The priest chooses the most perfect of all the korban to be the lamb since Christ Himself was perfect. After this there are many prayers over the chosen korban and wine to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ. A few additional prayers are prayed during the Offering of the Lamb before the Liturgy of the Word begins.

The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is the part of the liturgy dedicated to reading excerpts from scripture. There are five readings during this part of the liturgy: the Pauline Epistle, the Catholic Epistle, the Acts of the Apostles, a Psalm, and the Gospel reading. Each of these is an excerpt from the New Testament. The

Church plans the daily readings for the whole year. Each day, readings are strongly connected to the message the Church wishes to give the congregation. These readings educate the faithful about the teachings of the Church and prepares the congregation for the partaking of the Eucharist. During certain seasons of the Church, such as Lent, there is a special set of daily readings that may differ from the normally planned annual reading. At the end of the Liturgy of the Word there may be a sermon. Often weekday liturgies do not have sermons between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Faithful, whereas Sunday liturgies typically do. The sermon often relates to a certain part of the Gospel reading for that day.

The Liturgy of the Faithful

The final part of the liturgy is the Liturgy of the Faithful. It is a series of prayers and hymns preparing the congregation to partake of the Eucharist. In the very early years of the Church, those who were not a full member of the church were expected to exit the church during this time. Participating in the Liturgy of the Faithful was not allowed for these people because the Church only allowed full members to partake of the Holy Eucharist. Although not as strictly enforced now, outside members are still not permitted to take part of the Eucharist. This part of the liturgy begins with a prayer of reconciliation. This prayer calls the congregation to reconcile with everyone in their lives before partaking of the Eucharist so that they may not partake of it in an unworthy manner. The Holy Kiss follows this prayer. After this follows several prayers for the world, for the worthy partaking of the Eucharist, and for the preparation of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Faithful ends with the distribution of the Eucharist.

The Distribution of the Holy Communion (Eucharist)

In the Orthodox Church, we believe that the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ. Although there is no visible change in the bread and wine, through God's grace, it becomes the Holy Body and Precious Blood of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Since it is so valuable, only the faithful who understand its priceless nature are allowed to take part of it. Only the priests are allowed to distribute the Body and Blood. This fact coupled with a large congregation may mean that the Distribution may often take over an hour to finish.

Variation in Liturgical Services

The above section has described the standard liturgical services which are used for the majority of the year, but there are special seasons of the Church that extend these services and include other unique ones. Some seasons of the church, such as St. Mary's Fast and Kiahk, stress certain services above others but no additional services are added. Other seasons like Holy Week include many new and distinctly different services. We will discuss the most notable of these seasons/services below.

The Three Night Festal Liturgies

The three festal liturgies occur at night. The three feasts which have night liturgies are the Nativity, the Theophany, and the Resurrection. These three festal liturgies are prayed the eve of the feast. For example, though the Feast of the Nativity is January 7, the Nativity liturgy is the night of January 6. In

addition, all three of these feasts are preceded by preparation fasts (refer to Paramoun section) and require the believer to abstain from food for nine hours preceding the liturgy to partake of communion for that liturgy.

The Nativity Season & Kiahk

Preceding the Nativity Feast, the Church observes forty-three days of fasting. The last thirty days of the fast are observed differently than the first thirteen. These thirty days are the Coptic month of Kiahk. During Kiahk the Church directs the focus of the congregation to praising God rather than asking of God. The Midnight Praises during the month of Kiahk are significantly longer due to the addition of many seasonal praises specific to Kiahk. In addition, the Nativity season has unique tunes and doxologies used throughout the entire forty-three days.

The Lenten Season

The Lenten season is one of the holiest times of the year where the entire church tries to focus on repentance, fasting, and prayer. This season consists of fifty-five days of fasting, so eight Sunday liturgies are celebrated during the fast. Each of these Sundays, the Gospel readings deal with fasting, repentance, and the kingdom of God. The Church uses these readings, hymns, and tunes to aid the believer through this season of penance and solitude. It is important to note that although the lenten season is fifty-five days, this does not include Holy Week which directly follows it. In Holy Week, liturgies are later so that the congregation can abstain for longer before the liturgy. There are also many more "Andeel" or Unction of the Sick prayers. During Lent, there is no vespers during weekdays because weekday liturgies are usually later. The Unction of the Sick service is usually held at the homes of believers but often it is open to the public and posted in the church's announcements.

Hosanna Sunday

Hosanna Sunday, or Palm Sunday, directly precedes Holy Week. Palm Sunday celebrates the entry of Christ into Jerusalem on a colt, where He was praised by a multitude of people as the prophesied king to come. This is one of the most joyful liturgies of the year and usually begins an hour early to accommodate for the additional processions and joyful hymns. Other than the additional hymns, prayers, and processions during the liturgy itself, much of the liturgy is the same as the standard liturgy. Immediately following the liturgy there is a general funeral prayer. This prayer is done in place of a traditional funeral prayer in case anyone were to pass away during Holy Week. During Holy Week, all of our focus should be on Christ's suffering and so there are no individual funerals. This prayer is done in the solemn Paschal tune and marks the beginning of Holy Week..

Sunday Evening To Wednesday Evening

The evening of Palm Sunday is when the Paschal prayers begin. From Sunday evening to Wednesday, five paschal hours are prayed each morning and evening. It is beyond the scope of this guide to discuss the details of these hourly prayers, but they can be broken down into the following categories: prophecies, the Paschal doxology (chanted 12 times each hour), a psalm (often chanted in the long version of the "Ke Eperto" hymn), a Gospel reading, and an exposition which explains the relevance and importance of the Gospel reading.

Pascha Week

Holy Week, or “Pascha” Week, immediately follows Lent and precedes Easter. This week is drastically different than any other week or season of the year. The major focus during Holy Week is living with Christ through His sufferings and ultimately celebrating the Resurrection. To achieve this goal, the Church has several services throughout the week with specific readings that help the believer to focus on Christ and His suffering before His Resurrection. The hymnal tunes and the appearance of the church help the congregation focus on the suffering and passion of Christ. For example, the church’s standard red coverings are changed to black, the hymnology is more solemn, and the sanctuary is closed for large portions of the services during the week.

Covenant Thursday

The morning of Covenant Thursday has several added prayers in addition to the five morning Paschal hours. The Liturgy of the Waters is prayed during this morning and a Divine Liturgy is also prayed to commemorate the institution of communion on Covenant Thursday. This service is one of the longest services during Holy Week. The evening of Covenant Thursday, there is a service for the five Paschal hours for the eve of Good Friday.

Good Friday

Good Friday consists of one major service that lasts the majority of the day and commemorates our Lord’s sufferings and crucifixion. This service consists of six Paschal hours with many additional hymns and prayers.

Bright Saturday

The night of Good Friday several hours after the Good Friday service, there is the Bright Saturday service. It involves many prophecies and praises and ends with a Divine Liturgy. This service lasts through the entire night, but takes many of its parts from the Midnight Praises and Matins. After Bright Saturday, the next service to be held is the liturgy for the Feast of the Resurrection which will be prayed that Saturday night.

St. Mary’s Fast & The Revival

During St. Mary’s fast, some churches have daily vespers with an extra section known as the Veneration and nightly sermons. This season is known as the Revival.

Prostration Prayer

The prostration or “Sagda” prayer is prayed on the 9th hour of Pentecost Sunday. It is split into three separate prayers with each prayer following the same pattern of several hymns, a prophecy, a Pauline reading, a Gospel reading, and an exposition. This prayer is based on the biblical ideas of repeated

offerings of prayers, litanies, and incense to ask for God's goodness and mercy.

Church Building

The church building has significant meaning and many of the smallest features of the church have beautiful spiritual significance. The first of many examples is the church building itself. The church buildings are one of three different shapes that reflect the mission and presence of the church in the world:

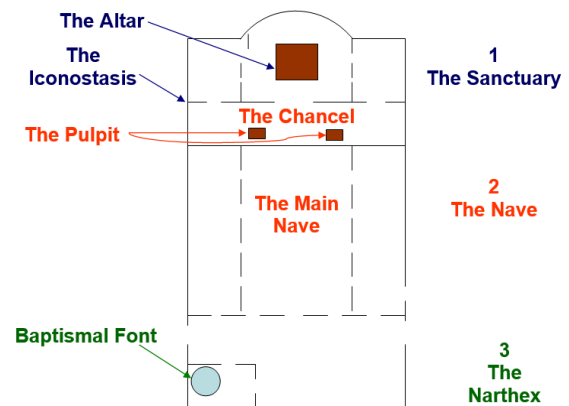
- 1) Cruciform: The church is the crucified body of Christ. (Usually in Byzantine style)
- 2) Circular: The church is timeless and without end. (More common)
- 3) Ship/Ark: The church is like Noah's Ark--a fortress for believers. (Most common)

Regardless of the shape of the church, the congregation while praying and the church building always face east, for the following reasons:

- a) Christ was called the East and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2)
- b) We remember the Lost Paradise which was in the east
- c) We look to Christ's Second Coming (Matthew 4:27)
- d) We look to the Cross

All Coptic churches follow the same layout and can be divided into three sections:

- a) The Sanctuary (with the Altar)
- b) The Nave: where the congregation stands. The Chancel is an elevated part of the Nave where the deacons and the pulpits are.
- c) The Narthex: the place of the Baptismal Font



Icons

The sanctuary is separated from the Nave and the rest of the church by the iconostasis, which contains many icons of saints. The iconostasis represents the saints looking to us from heaven and the unity between the Church and heaven. The Church does not worship the saints or put them in the place of God, but rather venerates them as those who have successfully finished the race. Saints are present with us in our liturgical worship. Icons help us to remember that we are not alone and that we "are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). We ask for the saints' prayers with the knowledge that the "prayer of a right person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).