

History of The Liturgy

Objective:

- To know the history behind the Divine Liturgy
- To understand what the Liturgy is all about
- To know the importance of the Eucharist in our lives

Memory Verse:

“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” (Acts 2:46).

References:

1. A History of Eastern Christianity, Aziz S. Atiya 1980; Rites and Ceremonials pages 126-130.
2. The Divine Liturgy a Company With Heaven, Fr. Bishoy Kamel; Coptic Church Review Vol. 5, # 2.
3. The Coptic Orthodox Divine Liturgy, Fr. Gabriel Abdel-Sayed; Coptic Church Review Vol. 1, #3.
4. Liturgical Worship in the Coptic Church, Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty; Coptic Church Review Vol. 8, # 4.
5. The Coptic Liturgy, Special Issue of Coptic Church Review Vol. 8, # 1.

Introduction:

Man has been given the longing to acquire the virtues: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*” (Matthew 5:6). He becomes as one who hungers and thirsts for all righteousness, that is, both for bodily virtue and for the moral virtue of the soul. He who has not tasted something, says Basil the Great, does not know what he is missing; but once he has tasted it, he is filled with sweet longing. Thus he who has tasted the sweetness of the commandments, and realized that they lead him gradually towards the imitation of Christ, longs to acquire them all, with the result that he often disdains even death for their sake. Glimpsing the mysteries of God hidden in the Holy Scriptures, he thirsts to grasp them fully; and the more knowledge he gains, the more he thirsts, burning as though drinking flames. And because the Divine cannot be grasped fully by anyone, he continues to thirst for ever.” **St. Peter of Damascus**

“The Holy Liturgy is a prayer itself, the highest prayer that exists. It is the Sacrifice, dedicated by our Redeemer at the Cross, and repeated every day on the altar. If you wish to hear Liturgy as it should be heard, you must follow with eye, heart, and mouth all that happen at the Altar. Further, you must pray with the priest the holy words said by him, in the name of Christ and which Christ says through him. You have to associate your heart and feelings with the holy words spoken. This way facilitates your comprehension of all that happens on the Altar. When acting in this way you have prayed Holy Liturgy.” **His Holiness, Pope Saint Pius X**

In the current era of Liturgical reform and “modernization”, the use of the historic Liturgy of the Christian Church has become synonymous with conservatism. This is due, in large measure, to the fact that the current form of the Liturgy, with a few minor changes, has been in use since the sixth century. Therefore, advocates of radical reform often make appeals to worship in a “new” and “fresh” manner. However, Liturgy and worship are not interchangeable ideas. Corporate worship is the activity that includes repentance to God, His forgiveness of our sins through confession and absolution, the Gospel, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper and our response of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Liturgy is the rite that congregations follow when they are worshipping. Not everyone

who participates in the Liturgy is worshipping, as worship also incorporates a faith response on the part of the worshiper. One can almost be certain that Cain and Abel used the same form, or liturgy, when offering up their sacrifices in Genesis 4. However, God accepted Abel's sacrifice while Cain's was refused because of the difference in their motivations and attitudes. The historic Liturgy, which has been used by the Church for almost 1400 years, is the form for worship that is most appropriate for engendering the correct attitude in the worshiper.

I. Origin

The Eucharist is the central rite of the Christian religion, in which bread and wine are consecrated by an ordained priest and with the attendance of the members of the congregation in obedience to Jesus' command at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). In the Orthodox Church this act is regarded as a sacrament, which symbolizes and affects the union of Christ with the faithful.

The word "Liturgy" itself is taken from the Greek word leitourgia, which can best be translated as "public service undertaken on behalf of the people". It comes from: "laos," meaning, "people" and "Ourgia," meaning "work".

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, this word is translated "ministry" or "worship" (Hebrews 8:6; 9:21).

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

The liturgy is a life that the church practices, through which she acknowledges her nature and realizes her message and attains her own existence, life and growth in Jesus Christ.

II. Roots

The central act of liturgy from earliest times was the Eucharistic assembly, the commemorative celebration of the Last Supper of Jesus. This was set in a structure of liturgical prayer. The first six centuries of the Christian Church saw the development of a rich variety of liturgical systems, many of which have survived in the Oriental churches.

The most widely used liturgy in Orthodox worship is the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. It is generally recognized that the wording of the Liturgy of St. Basil goes back to the 4th century to St. Basil himself.

The Divine Liturgy is the central function in all Coptic sacraments. It is like standing before the Lord. Indeed, all the numerous sacraments connected with baptism, matrimony, unction of the sick and the rest converge upon the Liturgy and should end with Holy Communion.

III. Details

The Liturgy cannot be prayed without an ordained priest, deacons and people. The altar, the vessels and instruments of Holy Communion may not be used a second time on the same day for the Eucharistic Liturgy. The liturgy may, however, be repeated on another altar in the church. The priest or an authorized man bakes the Holy Bread; leavened but not salted, in the morning of the day it is to be used. The Holy Bread is stamped with a cross surrounded by twelve smaller crosses and an inscription from the Coptic Trisagion: "Agios O Theos, Agios Ischyros, Agios Athanatos," from a hymn sung by Nicodemus and Joseph at the Lord's entombment, "Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal!" The Holy Bread is then pierced five times around the central cross, symbolizing the four nails, and the spear used in the Passion (three on the right side (two nails and one spear) and two on the left. Note here that there are two nails for the two arms and two nails for the two legs. They used

to nail one leg first and then nail the second leg on the top of the first). The chosen Holy Bread is called Hamal, meaning the ‘Lamb.’

St. Theodore says, “The two deacons on either side of the altar are symbolic of the two angels standing by the tomb at the time of resurrection because the altar stands for the tomb where the Sacrifice was laid.” Also the presence of a deacon by the Sacrifice symbolizes the presence of the angel who tended to the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane during His suffering as a sacrifice since the Sacrifice of the Liturgy is itself the Sacrifice of the suffering of the Lord.

At present, the Copts use only three liturgies: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Nazianzen, and St. Mark. The last was initiated by St. Mark and perfected by St. Cyril the Great, whose name is usually associated with it. The Basilian Liturgy is habitually used throughout the year, while the Gregorian is often reserved for the festive occasions of Christmas, Epiphany and Easter. The Cyrillian Liturgy of St. Mark is rather long and little known and is partially used during Lent Sundays.

Most of the Coptic Divine Liturgy is chanted. All hymns, prayers and litanies officiated are full of images, symbols, and expressions taken from the Bible, requiring the knowledge of the Scriptures for their understanding.

The Divine Liturgy requires a sequence of movements or rites including readings, kneeling, raising of hands, bowing of head, the kiss of peace and standing. The liturgy is actually officiated in three main stages. The first is the Matins Services. The second is the liturgy of the word (Catechumen). The third is the liturgy of the faithful, where it is inaugurated with the Nicene Creed, followed by a long service of prayers, litanies and intercessions that encompass almost everything and everybody. During the liturgy the celebrant bishop, or priest, the deacons and the congregation become engaged in various responses humbly interceding for the sanctification of the occasion.

The Coptic liturgy reveals the deep and intense piety of the Coptic Church, its meditation on Scripture and delight in the saints.

IV. The Characteristics of the Coptic Liturgies

- ⌚ The Coptic liturgies are not monopolized by the clergymen, they are the liturgies of all the church, laymen and clergymen.
- ⌚ The Coptic liturgies not only characterize the church unity, clergy and laity, young and old, men and women, but also aim at revealing the heavenly life as near and recognizable to us.
- ⌚ The Coptic liturgies are correlated to the church dogmas and doctrines. The liturgy is the school of the people, which opens its doors to the children through its simplicity and to the theologians through its depth.
- ⌚ The Coptic liturgies are correlated to the ascetic church life.
- ⌚ The Coptic liturgies are biblical. Every liturgy declares the word of God and the experience of the evangelic life.
- ⌚ The Coptic liturgy touches the believers’ daily life, where the believers practice the common worship as a part of their lives as a whole.

We find our comfort in the liturgy of the Eucharist, as we find the precious Blood of Jesus Christ as the expiation of our sins (1 John 4:10), and a source of our inner peace.

It is noteworthy that the Orthodox faith has its most adequate expression in the Divine Liturgy, which through worship contributes to the building up of the members in the One Body of Christ.

V. The Six Meanings of The Eucharist

The Eucharist has six meanings that no other sacrament has, nor any other Church service can achieve. In trying to understand the Eucharist, as far as it is humanly possible, the Church Fathers

and theologians throughout the ages have looked at it from numerous aspects that are reflected in its numerous names. These are:

1. THANKSGIVING (Eucharist): This is the first part of any prayer where man thanks, blesses and glorifies God for His divinity and His work in creation and in salvation.

2. REMEMBRANCE (Anamnesis): Following the words of Christ at the Last Supper we (remember) Him in His work of salvation "*For every time you eat this Bread, and drink of this cup, you preach My death, confess My resurrection and remember Me til I come.*"

3. OBLATION (Sacrifice): which is an anamnesis of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, the Church, as His body, offers herself and all her members within this one eternal Sacrifice.

4. PRESENCE OF GOD: The Eucharist is a Trinitarian action in which is manifested the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

5. INTERCESSION: In the Eucharist, the Church intercedes for the living and the dead through Christ.

6. COMMUNION: With each member participating in the one Body and Blood of Christ, they are no longer separate individuals but One Church, the Bride of the Lamb.

"At the Last Supper, on the night He was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of His body and blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us" (Sacrosanctum Concilium 47).

Conclusion:

There is nothing on earth holier, higher, and more solemn and life giving than the Liturgy. The Liturgy is the constant reiteration of God's love for mankind and an all-powerful petition for the salvation of the whole world and every individual person.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice, or Christ's most Pure Body and Blood, is the inexhaustible source of reconciliation with God, the mercy of purification, sanctification, and renewal for all believers, an active prayer for the bringing to Christ of all peoples of the world. In the liturgy the Church is presented to the Golgotha, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to enjoy the sacrificial Blood of her Savior, practicing the saving deeds of her heavenly Father. In other words the Eucharist is an anamnesis of the redeeming action of Christ in the mysterious sense that it is still active and continuous.