

Introduction to the Liturgies in the Coptic Church

The liturgy is the fundamental task of the Church for through it we relive the same moments the disciples lived when the Lord established His new covenant with man.

Expressions Used:

- Liturgy: Means any public service, but the word had been set aside to designate the Divine Liturgy service.
- Kodas: From the Hebrew word Kodashim or Kodoshim meaning Holy Things.
- Anaphora: Greek word means "carrying up" for we offer the bread and wine and carry it on the altar to the Lord.
- Mass: A Latin word from Messa meaning "sending away" or "dismissing". The Orthodox do not use this term for it refers to the last thing the priest does in the liturgy which is the congregation dismissal.
- Eucharist: Means thanksgiving. It is the oldest and the most famous word used for the Divine Liturgy. It was in use since the since Apostolic era and is mentioned in the Didache, a letter sent by St Ignatius the Theophorus, and St Justin

The Order of the Liturgy:

1. The liturgy begins with the preparation of offering the lamb:
 - readiness of the priest,
 - setting up the altar, and
 - preparing the bread and the wine
2. The beginning prayers:
 - Thanksgiving prayer
 - Offering prayer
 - Absolution
3. Synaxis or liturgy of the word or the Catechumens' liturgy during which the readings are read.
4. The liturgy itself or the believers' liturgy.

Liturgies Used:

The Coptic Church uses three liturgies:

1. St Basil (330-379):

He reposed two years before ecumenical council in Constantinople and had a great role in defeating Aryanism. He studied philosophy in different counties including Egypt. He is one of the Cappadocian Fathers, along with his brother Gregory of Nyssa and his lifetime friend Gregory Nazianzus

In Egypt, he was introduced to the Coptic monasticism and borrowed much from it as evidenced in his canons. Moreover, he added to the Coptic prayers and wrote his liturgy. That is why the Coptic liturgy of Basil is different than that of the Greeks (Caesarean liturgy) for he also borrowed their prayers and added to them.

St Basil's liturgy is the most common used liturgy in the Coptic Church around the year.

2. St Gregory of Nizianzen (329 -389):

Born in Arianzus, near Nazianzus, in southwest Cappadocia and loved the life of seclusion and contemplation as evidenced from his writings. St Basil ordained him a bishop over a small town Sasima. Because of confusion over which Episcopate Sasima belonged to, St Gregory refused to be enthroned and went back to his father's house where he spent two years writing. In 379 A.D, the Church asked him to go to Constantinople to fight Aryanism and was successful in expelling the Arians and winning back the city to Orthodoxy to the extent that the 2nd ecumenical council was held in Constantinople two years later in the year 381.

3. St Mark:

The first and the oldest Coptic liturgy that was written by St Mark the evangelist. He is one of the 72 apostles, and the founder of Christianity in Egypt. He is the first Patriarch with unceasing succession to the 117th Patriarch (Pope Shenouda the 3rd). He was martyred in Alexandria in the year 68 A.D. 30 Barmouda (Coptic), May 8th (Gregorian), April 25th (Julian).

His liturgy used to be passed down orally till the time of Pope Cyril the 24th, the pillar of faith who fought the Nestorians and presided over the 3rd ecumenical council in the year 431 A.D. in Ephesus. He used to pray

with St Mark's liturgy in Greek - as Greek was the spoken language in Alexandria.

During St Cyril's time, Christianity spread all over Egypt and the need arose to have the liturgy translated into Coptic. He translated into Coptic adding other prayers to it and leaving the deacon's responses in Greek. The reason for this was to make sure that any visitors could understand the deacon's commands and could follow along¹. For this reason, the liturgy is called after St Cyril.

The Church prays this liturgy during Great Lent because of its lengthy service and the Gregorian during the feasts because of its tune. However, this is only from a practical standpoint and any liturgy could be prayed with at any time.

The Church celebrates St Cyril's departure on 3 Abib (Coptic), July 10th (Gregorian), April 25th (Julian).

Adapted from a lecture by Fr. Shenouda Maher, Rochester, NY

¹ At that time, there used to be only one church in a town. If the town belonged to the Alexandrian episcopate, then there was only the Coptic Church and no other churches would exist for other ethnic groups (e.g. Armenian, Greek, ..etc)