



Holiness of Hymns and Purity of Praises

Coptic Hymns & the Divine Liturgy of St Basil ΦΗΘΟΥΑΒ ΒΑCΙΛΙΟC

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† Introduction

Music is the language used by the Seraphim in Heaven and humans on earth to praise God. It is the language of the soul as prayer is the language of the heart. **St Augustine** says, *There is no emotion of the human spirit which music is incapable of expressing*.

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Despite Coptic hymns being primitive and very ancient they are still alive and appeal to both the simple and the sophisticated. Coptic Hymns continue to offer joy, peace, stimulation and fulfillment to whoever takes interest in them. All other forms of music may go out of style with time but the Coptic hymns have provided the Copts with an everlasting means of praising God as well as of self-comfort.

Historical Development of Hymns In the Old Testament:

Man has used music in the worship and praise of God since the very early days of humanity. It started during the days of Adam and reached a peak during the life of King David, whose Psalms and hymns are still in use today. The Old Testament is full of references to the use of music and musical instruments in the Jewish worship.

† The Early Church in General:

The Jewish apostles founded the early church and hence it is expected that the early church must have been influenced by the Jewish music. This music took two forms, the Temple music, which was vocal, and the Synagogue music, which used musical instruments. An evidence of such an influence is the universal use of the Jewish word *Alleluia* in all churches. Such an influence, however, varied from one church to another depending on the language, culture, music and



Two pages at the beginning of a Copto-Arabic MS of the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great.

tradition of the various nations. An example of this is the Ethiopian Church whose hymns and music totally differ from its parent church; the Coptic Church.

The Coptic Hymns

Historical evidence suggests that the Coptic hymns existed since the Apostolic Era. It was formulated and formalized during the foundation of the Coptic Church. Contrary to the western churches whose hymns were developed with time, the Coptic hymns were in existence from its

conception and remained unchanged.

† Development of Coptic Hymns

The Coptic hymns began to develop shortly after the preaching of St Mark the Apostle in Alexandria. Early Christians were basically Jews, who lived in large numbers in Alexandria, and Egyptians. Both groups have contributed to the formation of the Coptic hymns. The Christian Jews brought with them well-established hymns both in wording and music. The Christian Egyptians brought with them the very deep music of the Pharaohs relating to immortality of the spirit, the one God and Glorious Resurrection. Both contributions mixed exceptionally well due to the similarity of the background of the two cultures, but mainly due to the dedication of the early Coptic Christians.

Nature of the Coptic Hymns

Coptic hymns are deep, harmonic and exactly defined songs meant to express the innermost emotions of the praising spirit. They do not follow musical notes or dedicated rhythm but rather they translate the pulses of the spirit. No doubt, the Coptic hymns were the product of highly spiritual people



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guided by the gifts and inspirations that were pertinent to the apostolic period. As such, it would seem impossible to duplicate it or challenge it by musicians.

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This conclusion was confirmed by the English musician Professor Earnest Newland Smith who visited Cairo in the winter of 1927 upon an invitation from Mr. Ragheb Moftah the Egyptian researcher. The English musician listened to the entire range of Coptic hymns and documented it in 18 volumes.

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Importance of Hymns

In a non-apostolic church such as the Protestant churches hymns are used to prepare the spirit for prayers or listening to preaching. In the apostolic churches, especially the Coptic Church, hymns are themselves a form of worship for both the singer and the listener. Thus there is no specific time allocated for the hymns in the service but the whole service is a symphony consisting of the priest, deacons and congregation served by the music. In other words the hymn is the part of the service during which the spirit is released to praise God with its full capacity and strength.

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The hymns represent a valuable inheritance, which dates back to the Apostolic Age unchanged. Thus are regarded as part of the Church's sacrifices and a living gift, which could be obtained through learning. Those who learn it become distinguished servants of the holies and participants of one of the church's most valuable sacrifices, namely, Praising God! Praising God is highly honored by the Coptic Church as it is a mystery of the heart. The Coptic hymns are phrases written around Divinity, faith and theological beliefs, which reflects the human conception of the nature of God. When it is sung driven by the spirit it expresses our participation in this faith and our thirst to the Creator.

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Thus, its real effect comes from the fact that the hymns are centered on God and his love.

It is an appreciation and a display of love and gratitude towards the love giving Father!

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Praise is a Divine service whereby we join the cherubim and seraphim in their continuous praise. Thus, we get raised to the same rank of the heavenly Angels.

The Divine Liturgies of the Coptic Orthodox Church

The word 'Liturgy' refers to the Christian remembrance and celebration of the Lord Jesus Christ's propitiatory sacrifice of His body and blood. Also known as the service of the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy is central to any Christian order of worship. *And He 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)

At the present time there are three Divine Liturgies used in the Coptic Orthodox Church:

1. The Divine Liturgy according to St Basil, bishop of Caesarea,
2. The Divine Liturgy according to St Gregory of Nazianzus, bishop of Constantinople,
3. The Divine Liturgy according to St Cyril I, the 24th Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Divine Liturgy according to St. Basil is the one prayed most of the year; St. Gregory's Divine Liturgy is prayed during the feasts and on certain occasions; St. Cyril's Divine Liturgy is prayed mostly during fasting days.

St Basil, Bishop of Caesarea

The Basilian Divine Liturgy was established at the end of the 4th Century, it drew heavily from that of St Mark the Evangelist, the founder of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt. It is addressed to God the Father. St Basil the Great, the champion of Eastern Orthodox, was born at Caesarea, the capital



St Athanasius



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of Cappodocia in 330 A.D. of wealthy and noble Christian parents. He was deeply influenced by the life of the Egyptian monks and became attracted to monasticism as a result of his visit to the Egyptian monasteries. As a monk, St Basil was influenced by St Pachomius (A.D. 290) of Egypt. St Basil became Bishop of Caesarea in the year 370 A.D. Among his great contributions to the Christian faith is his collaboration with St Athanasius (296-373 A.D.), the 20th Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt in its fight against Arianism and in defending the doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ's Divinity.

The Divine Liturgy of St Basil The Great, Bishop of Caesarea

The sections and divisions of the liturgy follow the same order and subject matter as taught to us by the Lord Jesus Christ: *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'* (Matthew 26:26-28)

The Coptic Divine Liturgy has the following main sections:

- a. Prayer of Thanksgiving
- b. Prayer of Sanctification
- c. Prayer of Fraction
- d. Prayer of Communion

The Divine Liturgy actually begins the night before, with the Raising of Incense, and ends with the Holy Communion. It can be divided as follows:

- I. Preparatory Prayers
 - a. Evening Service (Vespers)
 - i. Prayer of the hours (Agpeya)
 - ii. Vespers Praises
 - iii. Raising of Incense
 - b. Midnight Service
 - i. Midnight Prayers (Agpeya)
 - ii. Midnight Praises
 - c. Morning Service (Matins)
 - i. Prayer of the hours (Agpeya)

ii. Morning Praises

iii. Raising of

Morning Incense

II. Offerings Prayers

- a. Prayer of the Hours (Agpeya)
- b. Offertory: Offering of the Bread (Lamb) and Wine
- c. The Prayer of Thanksgiving
- d. Absolution of the Servants

III. Liturgy of the Word

- a. Readings - Passages from:
 - i. Pauline Epistles
 - ii. Catholic Epistles
 - iii. Book of Acts
- b. Synaxarium: The Saints of the day
- c. The Holy Gospel with an introductory prayer and Psalm reading
- d. Sermon
- e. Long Litanies: Supplications for the Church, the fathers, and the congregation

IV. Liturgy of the Eucharist

- a. The Creed (Nicene Creed of St Athanasius, the 20th Coptic Pope)
- b. The Prayer of Reconciliation
- c. The Eucharistic Prayers (iHoly Holy Holy)
- d. Sanctification of the Offerings
- e. Prayer of the Holy Spirit invocation and outpouring.
- f. Short Litanies: Supplications for the Church unity and peace, the fathers, the priests, the Place, the waters (or the vegetation or the crops), and the offerings.
- g. Commemoration of the Congregation of Saints
- h. The Prayer of the Fraction of the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ
- i. The Confession and Declaration of Orthodox Faith
- j. The Holy Communion ✙

References

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2. The Holy Psalmody (in Coptic)
3. The Book of Daily Praise and Hourly Psalms
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