

Spirituality of Our Church Rituals II

Characteristics of Our Coptic Church

The True Church of our Lord Jesus Christ has four specific characteristics by which it is distinguished and recognized from other denominations. These characteristics include ONE CHURCH, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC. Symbolic of our church since its establishment by the Lord Jesus Christ on Great Thursday, these characterizations still hold steadfast from their conception until present day. The Orthodox Creed written at the very First Council of Nicea emphasized, “*We believe in ONE HOLY, CATHOLIC, and APOSTOLIC CHURCH.*”

The One Church

The True Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is only ONE, meaning the one union in faith, teaching, and doctrine.

- A) God sent His only begotten Son to the world through the Mystery of Incarnation to save all and to gather us together as ONE flock with ONE shepherd as prophesized by Ezekiel the Prophet (Ezekiel 37:22).

Our teacher, St Paul, emphasized this fact “*For He Himself is our peace, who has made both ONE, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the Law of Commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself ONE new man from the two, thus making peace (Ephesians 2:14-15).*”

- B) Our Lord Himself mentioned in the Holy Gospel according to St John 10:16, “*And other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they will hear my voice and there will be ONE flock and ONE shepherd.*”

- C) Our Lord Jesus Christ taught His apostles to be ONE and in His meditation with His Heavenly Father, He asked, “*I don’t pray for these alone but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they all may be ONE, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be ONE in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be ONE just as We are ONE: I in them, and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in ONE, and the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them as You have loved Me.*” (John 17:20-23)

- D) The Apostles teachings stated this ONENESS. St Paul said to the Ephesians (4:1-4) “*I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the Calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with long suffering, bearing with ONE another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity (ONENESS) of the Spirit in the bondage of peace. There is ONE body and ONE spirit, just as you were called in ONE hope of your calling.*”

- E) The Coptic Church is ONE because for the Church “*there is ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, ONE God and Father of all who is above all and through all, and in you all.*” (Ephesians 4:5-6)

- F) The teachings of the Fathers in the early centuries emphasized this ONENESS. St Clement, the Alexandrian said, “*As the church belongs to ONE so it is ONE, even though heresies tried to*

split it, it is one as we believe ONE Church, unique, Catholic and according to the Hypostasis, the belief, the origin and the highness.”

St John Chrysostom stated, *“Although the churches are numerous in cities and villages the church is ONE because the Lord Jesus Christ present in the church is ONE, complete and undifferentiated.”* St Ephriam correlated this, *“Although the church is scattered all over the earth, it keeps the Holy Gospel active as it lives in ONE house and believes in the same Mysteries as it has ONE spirit and ONE heart. So the churches in Galatia, Egypt, Rome, and all parts of the world have one spirit where the preaching of salvation moves in each place: by its own self as the sun which is created by God brings light to the whole world and it is only ONE and no more.”*

St Basil the Great said, *“All those whose hope is only in the Lord Christ are ONE congregation and the Christians are only ONE Church although they belong to different countries.”*

Now the unity (ONENESS) of the Church is clear, but the question comes upon where does this unity actually stand? The unity of the Church stands upon all believers who are scattered all over the earth from ONE body, who believe in ONE Orthodox faith, whose goal is salvation of all people. Therefore, the Church is to be of ONE faith, and ONE unity of all believers everywhere in The ONE who is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church’s Head.

So, any group that teaches another faith could contradict the Apostolic Teachings (II Timothy 4:3) and could become outside the True ONE Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. No one can call his or her faith a *“church”* if it resides as separate from the True Church (I Timothy 6:3).

St Augustine stated, *“To have salvation and eternal life, the Lord Christ should be your head and no one could do this if he is not united in the Body of Christ which is the Church.”* St Cybrian said, *“Who, the Church is not his own mother, could not have God as his Father. As those outside Noah’s Ark could not be saved, so everyone outside the Church will not be saved.”*

Holiness of the Church

The second important characterization of the Church is its HOLINESS as prophesized by Isaiah the Prophet (35:8) and as written by St Paul, *“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)

The Church is HOLY because:

A) *“Her Lord is the origin and spring of HOLINESS and He is the HOLY of HOLIES.”*
(Daniel 9:25)

As our Lord Jesus Christ has all divine perfections in His Mysterious Body, which is the Church, so it is HOLY as it is His own flesh and bones, *“for we are members of His Body, of His flesh, and His bones.”* (Ephesians 5:30)

- B) All believers in Him have been sanctified by His Holy Blood “*and such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*” (I Corinthians 7:2)
- C) All church members are invited to sanctification and Christian perfection (Hebrews 13:14 and I Timothy 4:7). They are also invited to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age (Titus 2:12).
- D) Her teachings and Sacraments keep and sanctify the believers in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. (James 5:14-20)

Catholicity of the Church

The third characteristic of the True Christian Church includes all believers giving them the salvation of our Lord without exception as the order of the Lord to His disciples to preach in Judea, Samaria, and all parts of the world. (Luke 24: 47, and Acts 1:8)

The Church is called CATHOLIC because:

- A) It includes all believers who are scattered throughout all of the earth (Romans 10:18). St Cyril the Great said we are called CATHOLIC denoting the church exists in all parts of the world. This was further agreed upon by St Athanasius the Apostolic and St Thophilokotoc.
- B) The Church is not bound by time and by place as it exists regardless of time and place since the Pentecost.
- C) All her teachings regarding the True Dogma about those seen and unseen are complete and perfect (St Cyril of Jerusalem).
- D) The goal of the Church is to bring all people in the world to the Lord Jesus Christ regardless of race, color, or origin. (John 20:22-23)
- E) The Church equalizes all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. “*There is neither Jew, nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28)

Apostolicity of the Church

This is the last characteristic of the True Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The True Church has been built upon the foundation of the APOSTLES and prophets, and the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself, being the “*Chief Cornerstone.*” (Ephesians 2:20)

The Church is APOSTOLIC because:

- A) She has her teachings from the Lord Himself and His saintly APOSTLES who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word from the beginning. (Luke 1:2)
- B) The Church keeps the teachings as received without any change or additions (Romans 16:17 and Galatians 1:8-11). Also these teachings have been built on the foundation of the APOSTLES and prophets. (Ephesians 2:20).

- C) Her shepherds have APOSTOLIC succession and are connected to the APOSTLES themselves *“and how shall they preach unless they are sent.”* (Romans 10:15) *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things and appoint priests in every city as I commanded you.”* (Titus 1:5)

Truly our beloved Orthodox Church is APOSTOLIC because it received the teachings from the Lord Himself by St Mark and keeps the teachings as received without any alteration. Her shepherds also have APOSTOLIC succession. This may contradict other denominational faiths, which do not have APOSTOLIC succession and the Sacrament of Priesthood.

In conclusion, our Coptic Orthodox Church is the True Church of the Lord Jesus Christ because:

- A) St Mark the APOSTLE took teachings directly from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and set St Ananias as his successor and the first Patriarch on the See of St Mark founded the Coptic Church.
- B) The Church’s shepherds are Biblical as they are ordained according to the Apostles Rite and have Apostolic succession from St Mark the first patriarch (Number 1) to Pope Shenouda the Third, Patriarch, (Number 117).
- C) The Church adheres to the teachings as received from the Lord without any change (I Timothy 6:3).
- D) Her faith is one, her teaching is one, she believes in one creed, all her members partake of the same sacraments, her goal of salvation of all people is one, and her Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His successors govern her.