

# Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church

A priest does not have authority from God to administer mysteries unless they derived their ordination from the Apostles. Of the seven mysteries, four are necessary for salvation:

- **Baptism** is a spiritual rebirth by being completely immersed in water so that, as Christ died and resurrected, we likewise die (under the water as under the grave) and rise (up from the water) and begin to live a heavenly life.
- **Chrismation** is administered directly after baptism. In the Bible, the Apostles used to administer this mystery by the laying of hands after Baptism, but was later replaced by administering the "Myron," which is a holy oil first made by the Apostles and frequently replenished.
- **Repentance and Confession** is the first step in obtaining forgiveness of one's sins so as to continue forward with a life intended to be free from sin.
- **Holy Eucharist**, considered "the mystery of mysteries," is the completion of the mystery of Repentance and Confession whereby the sins that were confessed are forgiven through the actual Body and Blood of Christ (the Eucharist). Through the prayers of the Divine Liturgy, the bread and wine are changed by the Holy Spirit into the actual Body and Blood of Christ. The faithful partake of this sacrifice for the remission of sins to further unite us to the Lord Christ on earth and for good defense for us when we stand before God who will judge who will enter heaven and who will not.

The other three mysteries are: Unction of the Sick, Holy Matrimony, and Priesthood.

## Copts Today

In Egypt today, where Islam is the majority religion, Coptic Orthodoxy comprises about 15% of the population. There are over 10 million Copts throughout the world including Europe, Australia, and Asia. The Coptic Church is flourishing in the U.S. Evidence of this is seen by the number of new churches established every year throughout America.

There are a number of notable events in recent history that have greatly expanded the reach of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1964 the British Orthodox Church was received into the Patriarchate of Alexandria. In 1991, the first Coptic churches in South America were established, one in Brazil and another in Argentina. Moreover, the Coptic Church has grown through its missionary work in Africa. In 1976, His Holiness ordained Bishop Antonious Markos to commence missionary work among the African tribes. In 1979, His Holiness made a pastoral visit to Kenya, Zaire and Congo. He was embraced as the spiritual leader of the Mother Church of Africa. His Holiness has been very keen to extend the Apostolic Mission of St. Mark across all of Africa. Today there are numerous Coptic Churches in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. Recently there has been an extremely fast-growing population of converts in the islands of Fiji.



## Coptic: a Language and a People

"Coptic" is the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Egyptians substituted the tedious hieroglyphic script with an alphabet derived predominantly from the Greeks. The word Coptic has its etymology in the word *Aigyptos* (Greek noun for "Egypt"): This word was used to refer to the Egyptians as distinct from the Hellenists and other foreigners at the time. This is a phonetic corruption of the ancient Egyptian word *Hak-Ka-Ptah*, which when translated to English means the temple of the spirit of Ptah, a senior deity in ancient Egyptian mythology. After the Arab invasion of Egypt in AD 641, the Arabs called Egypt *dar al-Qebt* (Arabic for "house of the Copts" or, to be more specific, "house of the "gypt" – short for *Aigyptos*). Hence, the word "Coptic" today refers to both a language and the Egyptian Christians.

## Apostolic Orthodox Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church (a.k.a. the Church of Alexandria) is one of the oldest Apostolic Churches in the world. There were originally five ancient Apostolic Churches established in: Jerusalem (where Christianity began), Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, and Constantinople. St. Mark the Evangelist, author of the Gospel of Mark, founded the Church of Alexandria around 61 A.D. In 68 A.D., the Feast of the Resurrection fell on the same day as the pagan festival in honor of the false god Serapis. A furious mob had gathered in the Serapion (pagan place of worship) and descended on the Christians amidst their celebrations. St. Mark was seized, a rope around his neck in the streets of Alexandria, and then jailed for the night. The following morning, the same ordeal was repeated until he gave up his spirit. St. Mark was the first Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria. Today, Pope Shenouda III is the 117th Patriarch of the See of St. Mark.

## Church of Martyrs

After the martyrdom of St. Mark in 68 A.D., the Coptic Church enjoyed an almost unbroken peace until 202 A.D. From 202-642 A.D., namely during the Roman Byzantine period, twenty one persecutions overtook her. The seventh persecution period was inflamed by the infamous Emperor Diocletian; his reign (284-305) is regarded as the age of persecution. Under Maximin Daia (305-313), his successor in the East, the massacre continued for eight years of systematic killing. This persecution accounted for a tremendous number of martyrs; among them was the 17th Patriarch St. Peter I, (302-311), known as the "Seal of the Martyrs."

The Coptic *Synaxarium* (a book that details the history of the Saints, their miracles, and other notable events) and the *Lives of Saints* represent only a fraction of martyrs who died for the sake of Christ.

So profound was the impression of the persecution of Diocletian on Coptic life and thought that the Copts decided to adopt for the use of the church, a calendar of the martyrs, the "Anno Martyri." The first year of that calendar was 284, the year of the disastrous accession of Diocletian.

COPTIC MONTHS			
<i>Thoout</i>	11 September	<i>Parmoute</i>	9 April
<i>Paope</i>	11 October	<i>Pashons</i>	9 May
<i>Hathor</i>	10 November	<i>Paone</i>	8 June
<i>Koiahk</i>	10 December	<i>Epep</i>	8 July
<i>Tobe</i>	9 January	<i>Mesore</i>	7 August
<i>Meshir</i>	8 February	<i>Little Month</i>	6 September
<i>Paremhotep</i>	10 March		

Listing of the Coptic Months and the days of the Gregorian calendar on which each Coptic month begins.

The months used for this calendar are those inherited from the period of ancient Egyptians. The Coptic year is equal in length to the Gregorian year. It has 13 months, 12 of them are 30 days each, and the 13<sup>th</sup> is 5 or 6 days long. The first month of the Coptic year is called "Tout." The last month, referred to as "the little month," is five days long; and during a leap year it is six days long depending on whether or not it is a leap year. After a leap year, the first day of the Coptic year (the first of Tout) corresponds to the 12<sup>th</sup> of September.

## Monasticism

St. Anthony, known as "The Father of Monasticism", was a Copt from Upper Egypt. St. Antony's life was recorded by his disciple, St. Athanasius the Great (the 20<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who later was the architect of the Nicene Creed [summary of the foundation of Orthodox theological belief utilized by all Apostolic Churches]).

The world's first anchorite was St. Paul, the Egyptian hermit. Many hermits came to Egypt to learn about the monastic life. They were then able to spread the teachings to their native lands. The Fathers of the Church (early Christian clergy and scholars whose insight is highly revered) came from numerous parts of the world to Egypt for training in the way of monasticism. St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) stayed under the Pachomian rule in Thebiad from 373 to 381. St. Jerome (c. 342-420) and Rufinus (c. 345-410), the ecclesiastical historians, spent time in Egypt. St. Basil the Great (c. 330-379) introduced monasticism to Byzantium. St. John Cassian (c. 360-435) spent seven years in the Thebiad and the Nitrian Desert and collected the material from personal experiences with the Desert Fathers for his two famous works: the *Institute* and the *Conferences*. He founded a monastery and a convent on the model which he had witnessed in Egypt. Palladius (c. 365-425), Bishop of Hellenopolis in Bithynia, wrote his *Lausiaca history*, sometimes described as the "Paradise of the Fathers." Women came too, such as Theresia, the fourth-century Spanish abbess, and Melania (c. 345-410), the aristocratic Roman widow.

Monasticism has survived in Egypt and has given the Coptic Church many Patriarchs who were seated on the throne of St. Mark.

## Doctrinal Basis

The Coptic Church believes in One God. The Bible and personal experiences teach us that God has three hypostasis – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is higher than the other, yet all exist as One, just as the Sun is a sphere, emits heat, and begets light.

Some non-Apostolic denominations believe in "salvation in a moment" whereby a person is guaranteed eternal heavenly life after death by merely professing that Christ is God and that He died for us. The Copts retain Christ's teaching to the Apostles in conformity with the Bible that, to obtain salvation and live eternally one must believe in faith and must comply with God's sacramental requirements. Christ set forth the sacraments upon His Apostles and they can only be administered by the Church.

A mystery (or a "sacrament") is an invisible grace (by the Holy Spirit—God Himself) given through a visible (material) means. The mysteries can only be administered by a canonical priest. God Himself ordained the first priests and bishops when the Holy Spirit was given to the Apostles, conferring authority to administer mysteries and to ordain others to do so after them.