

Spirituality of Our Church Rituals III

Characteristics of Our Coptic Church

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The characteristic of our Coptic Church to be contemplated upon in this article is the Church building itself. The Coptic Church building is a place where believers gather together to praise and worship the Lord. It is a place Christians practice the Holy Sacraments, attend the Divine Liturgy, and partake of the Eucharist. The Apostles were the first to call a designated place of worship, "*the Lord's Church.*" (I Colossians 11: 17-18 and 14:34)

The Church Building:

In the era of our Patriarchal fathers until Moses there was no specified place of praise and worship to God. The Fathers would worship the Lord and offer their sacrifices on the mountains and in valleys wherever they happened to be located. This was due in part to the fact that most people at that time were worshipping idols. When Moses delivered the Israelites out of Egypt to the land of Canaan, the Lord commanded Moses to make the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a tent not a building made of stone (Exodus 25:27). The Tabernacle was mobile as the Israelites were on route to the Promised Land, Canaan.

The Tabernacle remained until the time of King Solomon who built the Lord's House (I Kings 6:2). It was the first church built by stone and consecrated for the worship of God in the Old Testament. It was consecrated and sanctified with the coming of God's Glory upon it (I Kings 8:9-22). The Lord's House was symbolic of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 2:21 and Hebrews 8:2). It was called The Temple. David the Prophet and King desired to build The Temple (II Samuel 7:1, Psalm 132:4-5, and Chronicles 28:29) but the Lord would not allow him. David was a man of war and bloodshed therefore David could not build The Temple but prepared the way for his son, Solomon, to build and consecrate The Temple.

In the New Testament, Zion's room, St Mark's home, was the place where the Apostles gathered following the Crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ and where the Lord Jesus appeared to them after His Glorious Resurrection (Acts 1:13-14). In the Zion Upper Room the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles on the Day of the Pentecost (Acts 2:2-3). Also, the apostles gathered together in The Temple (Acts 2:46). Because of the persecution the early believers suffered, a specific meeting place was not practical. Therefore, they gathered together in fellowship in one another's' homes.

When Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire under King Constantine, the believers began building a Church. It began as one Church at each capital city where all believers in that city and the surrounding small cities and villages could meet together and worship under the leadership of the city's bishop. Later on, increasing numbers of believers led to more churches being built especially during the time of Pope Theophilis. Pope Theophilis converted the temples for idols into churches with the permission of King Theodothios. Scholars have referred to Pope Theophilis as, "*Theophilis the Church Builder.*" Also many churches were built in Jerusalem due to the encouragement of Queen Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine who built the Church of Resurrection in Jerusalem.

Design of Church:

The Holy Book of Exodus 5:4 discusses how Moses ascended on the Horeb Mountain where God showed him the design of the house and commanded him to make it exactly as he saw. St Paul, the apostle, mentioned the similarity between this and the Church, as that house was a symbol for the coming Church of Christ (Hebrews 8:5).

The Tabernacle was divided into three compartments; 1) the House of People, 2) the Holy of Priests, 3) the Holy of Holies which was separated from the Holy by the Veil, only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies one time per year (Hebrews 9:2-7). Likewise, Solomon the King built The Temple according to the symbol and example that God gave David the King in spirit (I Chronicles 28:11-19).

In the New Testament, the apostles decided the design of the Church's building as the Ark of the Covenant, square or rectangular "from the east to the west," or as the Ark of Noah (Genesis 6:15), or circular symbolizing the eternal life. The symbols utilized in designing the Church refer to the fact that we don't have permanent homes here on earth and we are simply strangers here traveling to our permanent homes in Heavenly Jerusalem. Sometimes, the Church can be built as a cross because through the cross we have all been saved through the power of God (I Corinthians 10:18-23).

The Church's building is divided into two compartments:

1. The House of Congregation
2. The Sanctuary

The Veil separates both from each other.

The House of Congregation is the place where the believers gather together and share their priest in the Divine Liturgy, hear the Holy Gospel and Epistle, and share the deacon's hymns. In the past the House of Congregation was divided into four ranks:

- 1) Rank of Weepers who stand weeping their sins asking the believers to pray for them.
- 2) Rank of Hearers, which includes only the people whom are allowed to hear the Holy Bible.
- 3) Rank of Kneelers that include people who kneel before the altar to the end of the Divine Liturgy.
- 4) Rank of Believers.

The Sanctuary is the place that entails the Altar where the priest offers the Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice. Only priests and deacons are permitted to enter the Sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy. It is not permissible for women to enter the Sanctuary or touch the Altar.

Building of the Church Towards the East:

Our church fathers practiced the building of the Church towards the Easterly direction for the following:

- A) The sun shines from the east and the Lord Jesus Christ is our Sun who shines over us and brought us to know the Heavenly Father the True Knowledge (I Peter 2:9).
- B) The star that appeared to the wise men and led them to where the Lord Jesus Christ was born appeared in the East.
- C) The Lord Jesus Christ ascended into the Heavens towards the East (Psalm 17:8).
- D) The Lord Jesus Christ will come in His Second Coming from the East (Matthew 24:27).

- E) Paradise of Eden was towards the East (Genesis 2:8) and the Church represents this Paradise and so the believers should look towards the East where the Paradise existed asking the Lord who will come from the East to bring them again to the Heavenly Paradise.

Naming of Churches:

Churches often are named for St Mary the Virgin, the Apostles, and the Martyrs. All churches are considered the House of the Lord (Psalm 27:4) where the Lord dwells among His people (Exodus 25:8, I Kings 6:12, II Corinthians 6:16). The church fathers used to name the churches with the names of St Mary the Virgin, the Apostles and the martyrs. This tradition has taken place since the Apostolic Era for the following reasons:

- A. In honor of the namesake who honored God in the highest. God who honored them by giving them authority (Matthew 19:27), fruits of the Holy Spirit (John 20:21-22), performing miracles (Acts 5:12), and they glorified God in their lives offering God everything including their lives for the sake of His Holy Name.
- B. God called Himself God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:6, 4:5, Matthew 22:32, and Acts 7:32).
- C. The Temple of Jerusalem was called the Temple of Solomon although it was the Temple of God but Solomon was its builder.
- D. God called His Law, "Law of Moses" (Malachi 4:4), the vision of Isaiah was called by Isaiah's name (Isaiah 1:1), the Holy Book of Jeremiah was called by Jeremiah's name (Jeremiah 1:1).
- E. The names of the Apostles are written on the pillars of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Revelations 21:14).