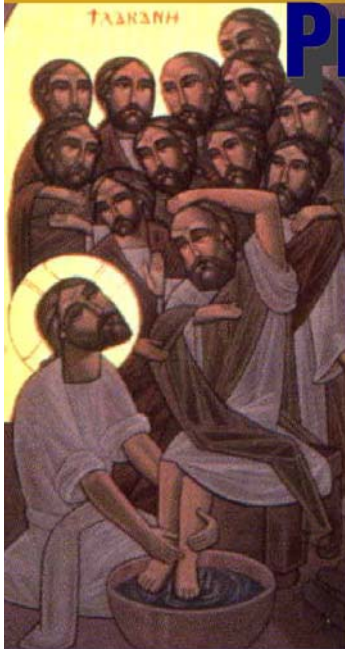




Servants' Preparation Program



Coptic Orthodox
Diocese of the
Southern
United States

*"For I have given you an example,
that you should do as I have done to you"*
John 13:15

Coptic Orthodox
Diocese of the Southern United States

RIT 102
CHURCH ARCHITECTURE AND
PRIESTS VESTMENTS

Servants' Preparation Program

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The Church Building and the Heavenly Life

The Church building is associated with the community and is bound to reveal its heavenly character and to help the human soul to the Divine throne.

Moses, when he established the Tabernacle, explained only the shadow of the eternal dwelling place. But we, in the Church, have entered the heavenly place itself (Hebrews 9:23), and enjoyed the Temple that is not made with hands (Hebrews 9:11).

The Orientation of the Church

Although our communication with God is distinguished by its intimate nature within the heart, it is not bound by time and place. However, there is the fact that our God likes discipline and hates disorder.

This explains the reason for orienting the worship toward a certain direction. Before Christianity, prayers were offered towards the Temple of Jerusalem, and the Church of the New Testament oriented its liturgical, as well as its private devotions towards the East.

According to the Apostolic Constitutions, “the Church must be oblong in form and pointing to the East.” Tertullian said, “Some assumed that the sun is the God of the Christians, because it is a well known fact that we pray towards the east, or perhaps, because we make Sunday a day of festivity.”

Such a tradition was mentioned in the writings of many early Fathers, as St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Tertullian. Such a tradition was clear in the early Church, in the Liturgy of Baptism, the candidate after the devil’s renouncement, is asked to face the East to profess his belief in the Holy Trinity.

The Theology of Orientation

1. Christ is our East:

Our Christ was called the “East,” and the Sun of Righteousness and Justice (Malachi 4:2). We ought to pray eastward in order to indicate that the soul is oriented toward the Dawn of Light, the Sun of Salvation, Who shines upon the new world, the Church.

Whenever we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we hear the Deacon exhorting us to look towards the East to see Emanuel Our God, present on the Altar.

2. A Reminder of the Lost Paradise

When we pray towards the East, we seek the ancient homeland, Paradise, that God had planted for us in the East. This orientation refers to looking forward, towards the eternal country.

3. Waiting for the “Parousia” (advent) of Christ

The Lord declared that his last advent looks like the lightening that appears from the East, and shines upon the West (Matthew 24:27). On the Lord’s Ascension, the Angel informed the Disciples that the Son of Man will come gain from the East (Acts 1:11). The Didascalia Apostolic states, “For it is written, ‘give praise to God Who rides upon the heavens of heavens towards the East’.”

4. Looking Towards the Cross

St. Athanasius raised a point that Christ was facing the West while hanging on the Cross. Thus, looking towards the East in our prayers, we meet the Crucified Lord, face to face.

5. The Orientation of the Graves

In the old Christian graves, some remarked that the majority of cemeteries were built in such a way, that the dead bodies were oriented to face the East, as they were waiting for the call of Resurrection, coming form the East. It was also said that St. Mary, on her departure, turned to the East and prayed in a heavenly language, and she laid down still facing the East. In the book “Ancients of Egypt,” Butler remarks that in every case, the Orientation of the Altar towards the East is evident, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

In Psalm 113:3, we read, “*From the East to the West,*” in Isaiah 24:15, “*Glorify the Lord in the dawning light*” in Zachariah 14:4, and in Ezekiel 43:1,2.

The Style of the Early Church Buildings

In the Old Testament, the believers were in their spiritual childhood; God took upon Himself the responsibility of dictating all the relevant details of the “House of God.”

In the New Testament, God considered that it is sufficient to grant us His Holy Spirit to guide us in all the aspects of our life.

There are some factors that affect the style of Church buildings:

(a) The Temple or Tabernacle

A quick glance at the Church and Tabernacle clarifies such a correspondence. The Church’s Sanctuary is analogous to the Holy of Holies; the Nave to the Holy; the Narthex to the courtyard. The Laver is fully realized in the Baptistry site, and the Altar of burnt offerings is fulfilled by the Altar of the New Testament.

(b) The Roman Court Law:

It might have affected the architecture of the Churches, especially in Western Europe, where it followed the “Basilica” style, or the “Imperial” style, as the building was dedicated to the King of Kings.

(c) The Pagan Temple:

Many of these unused temples were transformed into Churches, because of the great number of pagans converted to Christianity. Accordingly, whenever a temple was utilized as a Church, relevant changes were required.

(d) Catacombs:

This term is associated with subterranean early Christian burial places (Ravine in Greek). According to the Roman Law, they should be assaulted as they were used by Christians, as places of worship, especially during the times of persecution.

The Shape of the Church Building

The church building is confirmed according to specific well defined shapes, in three designs:

- (a) The Cruciform
- (b) The Circle
- (c) The shape of a ship

These forms reveal a substantial aspect of the nature of the Church, her character, and her message.

(A) **The Cruciform Shape:**

This type gives an idea of the mystical nature of the Church, as being the crucified Body of Christ. It was very common in the Byzantine style, but rarely used in the Coptic Churches.

(B) **The Circular Shape:**

This design refers to the eternal nature of the Church as being an endless line. This type is very common in the Coptic architecture.

(C) **The Shape of a Ship:**

This is the most commonly used shape in the Coptic Orthodox Church. It held a special mystical significance, even before Christianity, in the Gentiles’ thought: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. Various shapes of ships were found inscribed on their tombs, rings and other jewelry. This explains their belief about immortality, regarding death as a journey to the other world. After Christianity, the symbol continued to express their new risen life in Christ.

The Ship's Symbolism in the Old Testament:

The ancient people of God regarded the ship as a symbol of salvation. No doubt, Noah's Ark represents, in many aspects, a substantial element as a shadow of the Church of the New Testament.

The Ship of the New Testament:

The ship, as a symbol of the Church, is a general tradition. Christians are sailing amidst frightful dangers, but within the Lord's ship, "The Church," they were filled with the hope of the reaching eternal rest.

The Church Building is Divided into Three Main Divisions:

1. The Sanctuary containing the Altar
2. The Nave that is separated from the Sanctuary by the Iconostasis. It contains two divisions:
 - a. The place for the Deacons (The Chancel)
 - b. The place for the Believers, which is the main Nave.
3. The Narthex for the catechumens.

The Sanctuary:

It is present in the very far East of the Church. It represents heaven itself, the place of God's residence. It is therefore called the "Holy of Holies," the "Great Dome," "Temple of His Holiness," the "Third Heaven." It contains the Altar that is related to it to such a degree that it can sometimes be called the "Altar." The Sanctuary is raised somewhat from the Nave. Inside the Sanctuary, and behind the Altar, lies the Tribune, also known as the "Synthronos", on which the Bishop's Throne is placed. On top of the Tribune lies the Niche that represent God's Bosom.

The Sanctity of the Sanctuary:

We honor the Sanctuary because of its spiritual beauty and we follow these traditions:

1. Lay persons are forbidden to take part in the communion inside the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is for the clergymen only.
2. We can only step into the Sanctuary bare-footed, according to the Divine commandment to Moses, "***Take your sandals off your feet, for the place whereupon you stand is holy ground.***" (Exodus 3:5), and usually, we step in with the right foot first.
3. No talking is allowed in the Sanctuary, except for necessity.

The Altar:

It is derived from the Latin word "ALTARE" which means "the place upon which sacrifices are slain (same in Greek)... in Greek, (Trapeza), i.e. the "The Lord's Table" (1 Corinthians 10:21).

Do we still need the Altar although there is no animal sacrifice?

Although there are no animal sacrifices, we still need the Altar for the unique Sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross. According to:

- (a) Malachi 1:11- *“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down...,in everyplace, incense shall be offered of My name.”*
- (b) Isaiah 9:19- *“In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt.”* This prophecy is specific for the Christian Altar in Egypt. It is not for the pagans, because it is an “Altar to the Lord.”
- (c) Matthew 5:23- *“...If you bring your gift to the altar...”*
- (d) 1 Corinthians 10:21- *“You cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of the devils.”*
- (e) Hebrews 13:10- *“We have an altar from which those who serve the Tabernacle have no right to eat.”*
- (f) Hebrews 10- St. Paul mentioned the sacrifices in the Old Testament being symbols fulfilled on the Calvary or in the Eucharist.
- (g) In the Didache (about 100 AD.), it is written that the Eucharist is a pure sacrifice. The early Church applied the Greek terms *“Thysia”* “” or “Sacrifice,” and *“Prosphora”* “” or “Oblation,” in conjunction with the word “Eucharist.”

The Altar Materials

1. Wooden Altars:

During the first four centuries, Altars were generally made of wood.

2. Stone Altars:

It is certain that from a very early date, stone Altars were in use, and there is a very close connection between them and the tombs of martyrs. As it is written in Revelation 6:9, *“...I saw under the Altar the souls of them who were slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held.”*

3. Metallic Altars:

When Christianity was declared as the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became natural that more expensive materials be used for making Altars. There are Altars made of silver coated with gold or ornamented with jewels.

The Altar Clothing

According to the Coptic Rite, the Altar is covered with three coverings:

1. The first cloth covers the Altar completely, from all side. It is decorated with four crosses, or one big cross in the center.
2. A white linen cover is put over the first, and it is about 15cm long on each side.

3. The third layer used during the celebration of the Eucharist is called “Prosporphine” “” (derived from the Greek word “Prosphora” () meaning “Oblation.” It also represents the stone that the Angel rolled away from the tomb of Christ. Little jingles are fixed on it, to give an audible sound when it is raised from the Altar (i.e. the earthquake).

The Tribune

Behind the Altar and around the Eastern wall of the Sanctuary, lies the Tribune. This is often made of marble or stone, and consists of seven semi-circular steps. The steps represent the orders of Priesthood. Typical examples are present in the Church of St. Mina, in Mariut, and in the Churches of Babylon, in Old Cairo (the suspended Church of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, St. Sergius, St. Mercurius, and St. Barbara).

On the Tribune, seats for the Presbyter are fitter, and in the center of the top step stands the seat of the Patriarch of the Bishop. From this seat, the Patriarch or the Bishop gives his sermon. This gives an idea that the clergy has no superiority over the congregation, except because they are the servants of the Altar. The Bishop’s Throne is called the “Synthrones” “”.

The Church that is provided with such a seat is known as a Cathedral. The Bishop’s Throne is a sign of the Bishop’s authority. They are instated on their Thrones on the day of their consecration, or in a separate ceremony.

The Bishop’s Throne at Present

Due to the expansion in the sizes of the Church buildings, a Bishop’s seat is added to the Chancel to enable the congregation to hear him with greater ease. Unfortunately, not a single Synthronos is now left in the Tribune of the Coptic Orthodox Churches.

Iconostasis

The Iconostasis, or Icon Stand, represents one of the most important architectural features of the Orthodox Churches.

It is a rigid screen of wood or marble, carrying the Icons of the Lord, His Angels, and His Saints. It lies between the Sanctuary and the Nave.

The original forms of Iconostasis were created very early in the Christian Churches, and they were mentioned in the writings of the early Church Fathers; however, the shape and height of these screens varied. On the side of the Sanctuary, a curtain was fitted, and it was opened and closed in accordance with the various stages of the services. This means that the Sanctuary is visible and inaccessible at the same time.

Its nomenclature as veil is however inaccurate, for the Christian Church never accepts a veil, similar in concept, to that of the Temple of Solomon. It has been knocked down forever through the Cross.

The Functions of the Iconostasis:

- a. The most valid motive for the introduction of the Iconostasis came as defense against Iconoclastic movement. The Church wished to confirm our relation with the Heavenly Creatures and the Saints in Jesus.
- b. It is also a sign of reverence towards the mystery of the Altar of the mystery of Christ the Sacrifice. Although this does not mean that the people do not share in the prayers of the Eucharist

The Symbolism of the Iconostasis:

- a. It reveals the reality of the Church as an Icon of the Heavenly Jerusalem and the future transfiguration of Man. It gives a heavenly atmosphere for the worshippers.
- b. The Iconostasis, with its various Icons declares the reconciliation between the heavenly world and the earthly one.
- c. It acts in favor of the Church Doctrine that our Fathers, who departed in the Lord are never separated from the Church, and did not lose their love for the salvation of mankind. So we can consider the Iconostasis as a symbol for reserving the front portion of the Nave for the Saints, who are in fact, one with their militant brothers.

The Positions and Order of the Icons on the Iconostasis:

These follow a certain tradition:

- When facing the Iconostasis, on the right side of the Royal Door, we can see:
 - o The Icon of our Lord Jesus Christ holding a page from the Gospel, on which is written, “ I am the Good Shepherd” because He is the unique Gate leading to the Heavenly Kingdom, and the Good Shepherd Who opened the gates of Heaven.
 - o The Icon of the Forerunner, St. John the Baptist
 - o The Icon of the Patron Saint of the Church
 - o Selected Icons of Saints and Martyrs
- On the left side of the Royal Door, we can see:
 - o The Icon of the Holy Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, the Mother of God. She represents the whole Church, and the Queen who sits at the right hand side of King, Jesus Christ.
 - o The Icon of the Annunciation
 - o The Icon of Archangel Michael
 - o The Icon of St. Mark the Evangelist
 - o A selection of Icons of famous Apostles
- Directly above the Royal Door, the Icon of the Last Supper is mounted. This signifies the office of Christ as a Priest

- On both sides of the above Icon, we usually find the Icons of the twelve Disciples. This gives the apostolic feature of the Church.
- On the top of the Iconostasis, a Cross is mounted, as it was written, “...*Before whose eyes, Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among us.*” (Galatians 3:1).
- The Icon of the Virgin Mary stands on one side of the Cross
- The Icon of St. John the Divine stands on the other side.

The Ostrich Eggs:

The main feature that distinguishes ancient Coptic and Greek Churches is the Ostrich Eggs. They are suspended before the Iconostasis between the Icons. Eggs generally held a symbolic meaning in the early Church, as a hope of resurrection, or the risen spiritual life in Christ. There is a traditional belief that the Ostrich, after laying her eggs, must keep looking at them, in order to speed up their hatching. So, when we go to the Church, we have to concentrate all our through and attention to the Divine worship, leaving behind us all earthly worries.

The Nave

The Nave of the Church is normally divided into two parts, or “Choruses.”

1. The Chancel, or the Choir (Chorus) of Deacons.
2. The Chorus of believers (The Nave), or the body of the Church

1) The Chancel:

It is situated on the East end of the Nave, separated from the Sanctuary by the Iconostasis, and from the rest of the Nave by a screen or fence.

The Chancel is one of three steps higher than the Nave. It contains seats for the Deacons, two candelabra, and two lecterns on which the Coptic and Arabic Books or readings (lectionaries) are placed.

2) The Nave:

The term, “Nave” is derived from the Latin “navies” meaning a “ship”. The Sanctuary and the Nave are correlated; the former sanctifies the latter, and the latter completes the former. The Sanctuary represents God’s presence, and the Nave declares the people’s meeting with God.

The Divisions of the Nave:

The Nave was normally divided into two parts by a colonnade.

The Southern aisle is reserved for the nuns, virgins, widows, women and their children.

This aisle is now used without any division for all of the female believers.

The northern aisle of the Nave is still reserved for the men. According to this order, children attend the liturgy with the whole congregation; with the women sitting at the right hand of the men, as the Queen is at the right side of the King.

The Domes:

Some Coptic Churches have built a dome called “Cupola.” This refers to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, seated in the Heavens. For this reason, it is usually painted with Icons of the Lord, or in a bright blue color, decorated with Angels and stars.

Some Churches have three Cupolas, that represent the Holy Trinity. Other Churches have five “Cupolas.” The principle one, which is large, in the center represents the Lord; and the four small ones around it represent the four Evangelists.

The Narthex and the Baptistry

The Narthex is the Western area near the entrance of the Church, where the Catechumens and repentant attend a special part of the Liturgy called “The Liturgy of the Catechumens,” or “The Liturgy of the Word.”

The Catechumens are those who are getting ready for baptism, and the repentant are Christians who have committed certain sins, and whose spiritual Fathers forbade them to receive the Holy Communion for a period of time.(this part is rarely seen in today’s church buildings)

The Baptistry Site:

With great spiritual wisdom, the Didache identified the location where the Baptistry is to be built. It should be built in the North Western side of the Church, i.e., at the left hand side of the entrance.

Because the Baptistry is considered the womb of the Church, through which we get born again, nobody can cross the chorus of the believers and receive the Mystery of the Altar, without first entering the Baptistry to go through the Divine Birth. And also because our Lord commenced His public ministry by the Baptism, we consider that the first step to enter among the believers is through the Baptistry.

The Church Doors:

There are three doors to the Church as mentioned in the Didache. “The Church must have three doors according to the Holy Trinity.” Nobody can enter to the Church except if baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Western door is considered the main door, through which we enter, in the direction of the East, to the Sanctuary.

The Church doors refer to the doors of the Heavenly Kingdom, which are: the Way, the Truth, and the Life. God loved these doors, *“The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all of the dwellings of Jacob.”* (Psalm 87:2).

In the early times, they used to draw twelve Angels and write the name of the twelve tribes on the Church doors, as mentioned in Revelation 21:12.

The Priesthood Vestments

- God has ordered Moses to make special garments for Aaron, his brother, the Levites, and the priests to use at the time of service, “And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. So you shall speak to all who are gifted artisans, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron’s garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest.”(Exodus 28:2,3).
- The purpose of the clergy vestments is mainly for ‘Glory and for beauty.’ If those who go to meet Kings and presidents take extreme care to wear their best garments, then what about those who are dedicated to minister to the Divine God? They would rather wear pure garments that fill their hearts with piety and fear!
- If Aaron’s passing way priesthood and sacrifices had their dignity and respect, then how great should be the ministry of the New Testament, which is truly the priesthood of Christ (the greatest High Priest)? (2 Corinthians 3:7-11).
- “But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?... For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.”

THE SERVICE VESTMENTS SHOULD BE WHITE:

- The Church has chosen the white color for the Service Vestments, for the following reasons:
- It is mentioned about God Himself:
“Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment..”(Psalm 104:2).
“ And the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow,...”(Daniel 7:9).
- In the incident of The Lord’s Transfiguration before His Disciples,
“and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” (Matthew 17:2)
- The Angels’ garments when they appeared at the time of the Resurrection were white, “And she saw two angels in white sitting,” (John 20:12).
- In the Book of Revelation, it is mentioned:
“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments...”(Revelation 3:5).
- The white color bears the concept of purity, cleanliness, innocence, sanctification of the heart, and the virtues that God’s Ministers should have. “And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” (Revelation 19:8).

What are the Priestly Garments:

- **The Tunic: (Tonía)**
It means the white robe...it is made to be white since it represents the purity of the servants of God and this color was mentioned several times in the Bible. This tunic is to be wear by all the ranks (Bishop, presbyter and deacon).

- **The Stole: (Badrashil):**
this is a red wide ribbon that surround the shoulders of the deacon and it takes the shape of the cross from the back...it remind the deacon of the blood of Jesus who saved him whole and also it is a symbol of being ready for service (The Arch deacon usually puts this from above his shoulder as a sign of leadership for the deacons).
- **The Presbyterial/Episcopal Stole (Sadra):**
It is taken from the same one that was used in the Old Testament (breast plate of Aaron).
- **The cuffs:**
Those are two pieces of cloth that covers from the wrist to the elbow of the priest (Bishop)...the old traditions says they were two handkerchiefs the priest used to have them during the service to wipe his tears.
- **The girdle: (al mintaq)**
It is a belt that goes around the priest waist (rev.1:13) “and in the midst of the seven lamp stands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.” It reminds the priest to be always ready for the work and labor in the vineyard of Christ.
- **The Tavlassan (priests only):**
It is the head cover...and it is like the twenty four elders who had their crowns while they stands before God...it reminds the priest with the honor and glory of his divine service.
- **The crown (bishop only):**
It is similar to the priest Tavlassan.
- **The Cope (bornos) : priest & bishop**
It is a rounded sleeveless loose robe. It represents the honor of the priesthood especially that the robe was also used by the kings & prophets in the Old & New Testament [the robe of Elijah 2 kings2:13, the robe of Aaron exodus 28:4, and the robe of Herod Acts 12: 21).
- **The Ballin: (only bishop)**
It means “what is worn on the shoulder”... it resembles the Badrashil of the deacons (little wider)...it even starts from the head and goes all the way down to under the girdle. It reminds him with the readiness for work and being surrounded by the righteousness of God.
- **The shield: (bishop only):**
It is a diagonal shaped garment that is attached to the Ballin near the leg...it represents the duty of the bishop as a guard for the flock of Christ “Gird your sword upon your thigh, o Mighty one, in your glory and your majesty...” Psalm 45:3

References:

***Ritual Theology notes by Fr. Philemon Mikhael
The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese website.***