

*THE ORTHODOX CONCEPT  
STUDIES IN CHURCH TRADITION*

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CHURCH  
HOUSE OF GOD*

*BY  
FR. TADROS Y. MALATY*

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**Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, King of Kings and  
Lord of lords**



**THE BEHOLDER OF GOD  
MARK THE EVANGELIST  
SAINT AND MARTYR**



*H.H. Pope Shenouda III, 117th Pope of  
Alexandria and the See of St. Mark*

# Introduction

## MYSTERY OF THE HOUSE OF GOD

*How lovely are Thy dwellings,  
O Lord of hosts !  
My soul longs, yea, even faints for the  
courts of the Lord.  
My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the  
living God.  
Yea, the sparrow has found a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself  
where she may lay her young,  
at Thy altars, O Lord of hosts,  
my King and my God.  
Blessed are they who dwell in Thy  
house.  
For better is a day in Thy courts than  
a thousand elsewhere...*

***Psalm 84***

In the middle of the violent storms of the world, and under the pressure of ceaseless temptations, the Psalmist paused to think. The sparrow has found a home to settle, and the swallow a nest to protect its young... but where would he find a place to dwell, and a shelter to inhabit?

No other place could compete with the altars of God, Lord of hosts, to please his heart and comfort his body. There, the ground beneath his feet vanishes, the whole materialistic world disappears from his sight, and his soul emerges to heaven, her abiding place. As if by wings of Spirit he is lifted up to the divine throne to visualise his King, God, and intimate Beloved One. Embracing Him and leaning across His chest, he casts his burdens and pours all his secrets, communes with Him, kindly reproaches Him, hears His voice and participates in His glories.

Tertullian expresses such a magnificent liberty which is utilised by the assembled church, by saying:<sup>(1)</sup> “We assemble in a meeting... so that we might surround God with our prayers, as if by powerful arms. Such violence is pleasing to God”.

Indeed, worship in the house of God is far from being a duty or a routine work exercised by a group of believers. It is, in fact, an urge to practice their own right, accepting the free gifts of the Holy Spirit. Their worship allows them entrance into the Lord’s green pastures where they are immersed into the spring of life giving water, feed from the heavenly banquet, drink from the chalice of salvation and enjoyment of the mysteries of God’s everlasting love. The Spirit gratifies them so that they desire nothing but to be in God’s presence. In their state of content they no longer request anything for themselves as much as for the others. They ask for presidents, ministers, the councillors, bishops, presbyters, deacons, monks and all ministers of the church, for the sick, the travellers, the prisoners, the distressed, the dead.... They even pray for the

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hermas: Shepherd, vis 3: 4: 4: 2.

animals, the plants, the rivers and the winds! How remarkable; there in the house of God all hearts are drawn up to heaven, but instead of becoming isolated to cope with their personal needs, they are, on the contrary, comprehensive in their love, requesting salvation, peace and renewal of every existing creature.

In the church, believers also join the angels in their “House of Angels”, partake in their heavenly liturgies, prayers and hymns. They remain permanently in their company rehearsing the praise of the ‘new hymn’ with angelic words! In his book ‘the Shepherd’<sup>(1)</sup>, Hermas writes that angels rejoice at the sight of the heavenly tower of God being completed in us, offering praise to God for the consistency of establishing the spiritual church body.

No doubt that the secret, behind the glory of the house of God lies in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is active in people’s life. St. Augustine calls Him ‘The Spirit of the church who overflows with every gift upon her members’. This is also expressed by the words of St. Irenaeus<sup>(2)</sup>, “Where the church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there exists the church and every grace”.

The prime function of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church is to shape her so as to resemble, and be an image of Christ, her Creator, so that ultimately she becomes an exact copy of Him, hence preparing her for the eternal marriage and qualifying her for the eternal glories... In other words, the Risen

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(1) Adv. Hear., 3: 24: 1.

(2) St. Cyril of Alexandria: Thesaurus 34, PG 75: 609.

Christ is transfigured in her life and His qualities are revealed in her. Along these lines we present some sayings of the holy fathers:

“It is solely through the Holy Spirit that Christ is formed in us and imprints on us his own features and so makes the beauty of the God-head come alive again in the nature of man”.

*St. Cyril of Alexandria*<sup>(1)</sup>

“The Holy Spirit is the life-giving odour of Christ, a living and effective odour. It attracts all creation to Him in order to take part of God’s superior nature”.

*St. Cyril of Alexandria*<sup>(2)</sup>

“When we drink of the Spirit, we are substantially drinking Christ”.

*St. Athanasius*<sup>(3)</sup>

In effect, when Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, shines on us with Spirit we no longer live in the shadow of darkness, but copy His illumination. As a productive start, we show love to others, serve them in humility and yearn for their salvation! By the Spirit we are brought to the circle of the Cross so that everybody longs to die with his Christ on behalf of all mankind.

Lastly, in the house of God, we do not just get in touch with God, the heavenly and earthly creatures, but beyond that, we are granted additional insight even into non-living

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(1) St. Cyril of Alexandria: In Joan. 11: 2, PG 74: 452, 3.

(2) St. Cyril of Alexandria: In Joan. 11: 2, PG 74: 452, 3.

(3) St. Athanasius: Epist. and Serapioni 19, PG 26: 576.

materials, and as a result we recognise all surroundings as holy and blessed. The wheat is no longer bread, but it is converted to the Lord's Body through the Holy Spirit, and likewise, wine is converted to the Lord's Blood. The rising incense represents pure prayers taken up to the divine throne by angels, and the Spirit sanctifies the oil. I can further say that the gold, silver, precious stones, wood, paper, textiles and even bricks and sand become holy when they are used to construct and furnish the holy house of God. Thus rigid materials are also utilised in the service of heavenly things.

So far we have introduced the mystery of the house of God which we aim to get across through our study of the church building.

The emphasis, however, being not to stress abstract ritual concepts or architecture developments as much as to cover the true spiritual concepts to the house of God, to be able to practice them in our daily life.



# **CHAPTER 1**

## **FROM PARADISE TO THE CHURCH**

# THE BUILDING

## A THEOLOGICAL SPEECH

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When the church opened Itself to the world, particularly in the west, her attitude was not to love Him and wash His feet as her Bridegroom, but instead, she went on competing and arguing with Him. The spirit of the world crept into her, so she hastened to challenge the world in its pleasures and plunged herself into its political affairs seeking mastery and domination. Naturally, many of the ecclesiastics were carried away from their spiritual attitudes, and the mission of preaching salvation to people, and subsequently, that was reflected in their lives, activities, worshipping, rites and values. As a result, they regarded the church building as a mere piece of architecture to boast its lofty height, position, decoration, or art...

Now it is time to ask: *What is the concept underlying the Church Building ?*

The church building, indeed, is an open bible written in a visible, tangible language that a simple child might understand, a theologian can contemplate deeply, a clergyman loaded with excessive congregational responsibilities can enjoy, and the spiritual hermit can find comfort in. It is a simple, but rather deep, theological speech that is delivered by the Spirit to everyone. The topic of the speech is “our life in Jesus Christ” as announced through our relation with God, the Church, society and heaven. Indeed it even touches our inner mysterious life.

In other words, the true authentic church building has its distinguished effect on the believer’s life, his inner feelings and

his values... It even extends to his private and public worship, his dealings with his brothers in the church and outside, as well as with the heavenly ones.

We can grasp this topic by studying carefully the concept of the “House of God”, and its development since the first creation of the human race as It passed through the following phases.

### ***FIRST: THE FIRST PARADISE***

Adam lived in Paradise as a priest in the house of God. Each inch in Paradise declared God’s love and care for him. Every now and then he would detect God’s presence around him and hear the sound of the Lord walking in the garden and respond to Him. With every breath Adam offered love to his Creator, everywhere and without mediators. Truly, the early Paradise with all its space, was the holy “House of God”, in which God planned to meet man without the need of a sanctuary, altar, offering, or incense.

Not before long, however, our parents were dismissed from Paradise, loaded with their burden of disobedience and unable to visualise the dazzling light of the Lord. In their weakness, and because of their deprived nature they felt as if heaven had become beyond their reach, and as if God had left them forever. They became aware of their earthly nature and wondered how they could be attached to the Heavenly One!

At this point it was inevitable that a heavenly action should intervene, to overcome such a deadlock created between

God and man. Not only that, but also to emphasise, sometimes by concealed internal feelings, and at other times by clear announcements and tangible signs, that God is keen on His relationship with us, and ever wanting to share with us even our home... In view of that, God has introduced the rite of the sacrifice and the altar, as a preliminary basis for the house of God.

## ***SECOND: THE ALTAR***

The introduction of the altar, as God's house even in its early and primitive stages, immediately reveals the two fundamental facts that are necessary in establishing the house of God.

### **1. The first fact deals with our relation with God.**

The word "*altar*" in Hebrew, as in Arabic "*mazbeh*", refers to the place at which sacrifices are slaughtered. This is evident from the story of Genesis (22:9) where Isaac was laid on the altar to be slew and burned, ie. meeting with God was made possible through a redeeming offering or sacrifice.

Indeed, if the house of God is a meeting with God, then it is definitely an entry to the Sacrifice of the Cross. Through this sacrifice, His beloved Son, we can be reconciled with God. His blood clears our sight so that we recognise the Lord as our Father, who sanctifies our inner depths and tears away the debt we were unable to pay.

On such grounds the house of God ought to be established; in exterior style, interior construction, all conducted

ceremonial worship, and every gathering that takes place within. In brief, the church atmosphere should be conditioned as to attract every heart towards God, to enjoy reconciliation constantly with the Father brought about by the sacrifice of Jesus our Saviour.

**2. The second fact deals with our relation with God as a group or congregation.**

This concept came to light at the time when Elijah, the prophet built an altar of twelve stones (1 Kings 18:30), imitating the Sinai tradition when Moses did the same thing (Exod. 24:4). Each stone represents a tribe, as if God's altar derives its existence from the combined effort of the whole people through the sacrifice of reconciliation. Thus although meeting with God is achieved on a personal basis, by our faith in the Saviour, it is bound to occur without isolation from others, ie. the holy congregation.

Once again, on such a basis the house of God ought to be built: its materials, rites or worships should all form authentic icons, revealing the two integral and inseparable aspects that govern our relation with God.

**A.** God eagerness to unite with each one personally.

**B.** God wishes that we all unite in Him, so that our knowledge of Him is not confined to the individual level, but is extended with the spirit of practical love and unity, as one church body extending from Adam. Each member represents a church, or a living sanctuary of God, that is not isolated nor

separated from the altar body or the church body which is the only bride of Christ.

### ***THIRD: BETHEL***

A holy historical incident of major ecclesiastical interest, is that of Jacob running away from his brother Esau. On his aimless way, lonely, distressed and nothing to look up forward to, he rested his head on a stone and dreamt. There was a ladder set up on earth, and the top of it reached heaven, and behold the angels of God were ascending and descending on it, and the Lord stood above it and said, "I am with you", (Gen. 28:12-15). Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Early in the morning, Jacob rose and took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it and called the place *BETHEL*, i.e. "*HOUSE OF GOD*".

Oddly enough, such a vision was addressed specifically to Jacob, father of the whole Jewish race, as his twelve sons later became heads of the twelve tribes. Such a choice focuses the light on the broader aspects of the house of God, compared with the elementary of the altar, as if God wanted to illustrate two vital facts of faith in conjunction with his relation with the people. These are: His existence among them, and the accessibility of the heavens to man.

1. His existence among them: While Jacob was running away aimlessly, with no place to rest, and nobody to shelter him

or offer him sympathy, God's voice assured him, "I am with you" (Gen 28: 15).

This point should be distinctly reflected on the church building. As Jacob found relief when he laid his head at the foot of the ladder, so it is with us at the steps of the house of God. Indeed, our souls rejoice, "Truly God is in this place", and the inner Jacob within us hears God's encouraging voice, through the building rite, saying, "I am with you".

2. The accessibility of the heavens to man: Jacob saw the angels ascending and descending on the ladder and at the top of which the Lord was standing: as if God wanted to fulfil His wish of linking the heavenly creation with the earthly one through incarnation and crucifixion (the heavenly ladder). Angels descend to serve the people, and humans rise to join the angels in their worship... Such a magnificent exchange explains why the church is called "House of Angels".

This is what was visualised by St. Chrysostom on contemplation of the incarnation. He said<sup>(1)</sup>, "First the Lord sends angels to people, then leads the humans to the heavens, thus establishing a heaven on earth, so that heavens is obliged to accept the human creation".

#### ***FOURTH: THE TABERNACLE***

For the first time, an official divine commandment regarding setting up the "House of God" had been issued to the people of God, on their way to Jerusalem, as the symbol of

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<sup>(1)</sup> Sunday Sermons of the Great Frs, Vol 1, p 113.

heaven, the dwelling place of the Lord. It was in the form of a tent ahead of their tents to be pitched wherever they camp.

The design of that tent was not a man's design but was directly dictated by God to Moses, after he had strictly fasted forty days and forty nights on the mountain. He was told, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown to you on the mountain". (Heb. 8:5; Exod. 25:9). In fact, the completed outcome of the tent; its name, exterior shape, interior construction, contents, rites, and movements were produced according to a precise divine plan that revealed to us the "Mystery of God's House".

That is confirmed by the Apostle Paul in the epistle to Hebrews, when he drew near the tabernacle, guided by the Spirit. To him, the tabernacle was not a tent covered with badgers' skin, goat and sheep's hair, erected on poles and pegs, carried on shoulders and containing the screen, an altar of burnt offering, a table of shewbread, the golden lamp stand etc. ... He recognised it, nevertheless, as an "example and shadow of heavenly things". (Heb. 8:5), which reveal mysteries of God's work among His people, things that the Apostle could not speak about in detail. (Heb. 9:5).

Evidently, the tabernacle fulfilled Jacob's dream, but in a more realistic and elaborate form. We mention as an example:

1. As far as the name is concerned it was called "*miskan*" in Hebrew, which means "*the dwelling place*", as if God wished it known that His tent resides among our tents, so that every heart is opened to Him, and turned into a dwelling for Him.

It was also called “*ohel mo, ed*” in Hebrew, or “*the meeting place*”, which signifies that the people are not assembled within to worship God, but that it is rather a place wherein God is present among His people. Through clouds and glory He visibly uncovers Himself to them (Exod. 40: 34).

2. Concerning its shape and external look, it was roofed with badgers’ skin, goat’s and sheep’s hair..., needless to say, it held in beauty. All its attractions were inside. Such is the case with the House of God. On the outside, it is stones, bricks and wood, but it bears hidden divine glories announced to the humble soul by the Holy Spirit.

3. With regards to the tabernacle’s internal design and contents, all its details exposed God’s saving deeds and as a mystery of God’s dwelling among the people. It included the screen, the laver of brass, the golden lamp stand, the table of shewbread, the ark of testament, the altar of burnt-offerings etc.

**A. *The Screen:*** This makes the “Holy of Holies”, which is entered once a year, only by one mediator (the high-priest), bearing blood in his hand, which acts as the passport for all mankind, giving access to God’s Holies. It is the mystery of “*heavens’ openness on the people*”. This Mediator is the Messiah, the sole High - Priest who “entered once for all into the Holy place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own Blood, having obtained eternal redemption”.

**B *The Laver:*** This is employed to wash and purify the body, symbolising baptism in the Church of the New Testament. It grants the baptised a new birth in order that he may become

entirely holy and a temple of the Lord in which the Spirit resides through the *Mystery of Chrism*.

**C. *The Golden Lamp stand:*** With its seven lamps, it declares the church's illumination through the continuous acts of the Spirit.

**D. *The Table Of Shewbread:*** This refers to the care of Christ for His Church. He feeds the people with His own body and blood, that they abide in Him.

**E. *The Ark Of Testament:*** With its inner contents uncovers the unity between God and people aiming them to participate in His Heavenly glories eternally.

In brief, we can say that the tabernacle and its symbols explain a good deal of the mysteries of House of God. We shall discuss this topic, in more detail, as we further proceed in this book.

**4.** With reference to its rites, the tabernacle bore the mystery of the Church and her sanctity. We can summarise those rites into three items: Sanctification by blood, Purification by water and Consecration by anointing with oil.

Until today, these are efficacious in the church, not through the earnest gift of the Spirit. With Christ's blood we are sanctified, purified in the baptismal water, and consecrated to God by the anointment of the Chrism.

Details of other rites associated with the sacrifices actually simulate the various sides of the mystery of the Cross. They

clearly indicate our rights in the Cross that we may appear as saintly ones, worthy to receive communion and become one in Him.

5. Finally, considering the tabernacle movements, they denote the nature of God's residence among His people, an effective and commanding one. When that cloud residing above the tabernacle moved under the guidance of God's Spirit, they all moved and they halted when it stopped.

Through this principle, the house of God must be able, in its design, to possess a positive drive, to lead the souls day after day, through the wilderness of this world to the New Jerusalem, guide by the Holy Spirit Himself.

In other words, the rite of the church building is a living and efficacious element, capable of acting in the inner heart.

It is quite remarkable that in spite of the prolonged movements of the tabernacle, many years in the desert in its way to Jerusalem, it had to stop at the Jordan River three successive days by a divine commandment, before crossing the river to the land of inheritance, as if passing beside the river to be buried three days with the Lord, and cross with Him to the power of His resurrection.

## ***FIFTH: THE TEMPLE***

When the people settled in Jerusalem, the temple was constructed according to the pattern demonstrated to the Prophet David by God. Once again, the temple design was

dictated from above, simply as an extension to the tabernacle. It included the same sections, the same contents, observed the same message and even followed its mobility. The tabernacle kept on moving across the wilderness with no fixed place to settle, referring to the foreignness of the church in this world, for she is only seeking its heavenly home. Likewise, God gave no permission to David, the man of wars, to find for him a permanent dwelling at Jerusalem. So long as the church is in a state of struggle, she cannot regain settlement. Only through her True Solomon, Jesus, the King of Peace, she can enjoy settlement, supported by His glories in heavenly Jerusalem.

It is not surprising, that the word “*Temple*”, in Hebrew as well as in Arabic is “*Hekal*”<sup>(1)</sup>, taken from the “*Ekalu*” language, and bears the meaning of the ‘*great house*’. It was exclusively used to refer to an imperial place. Hence, the House of God as a temple, can only designate that its occupant (God) is the King reigning upon the hearts of His people and their inner senses guiding their external plans.

In that sense, the church ought to be a “*Temple*” that manifests God’s Kingdom in people’s lives, and is capable of preparing the inner hearts to be thrones of God.

Now we can realise Jesus’ tremendous love for the temple, considering it the “House of my own Father”, which is worthy of every honour. Within, prayers take place as a sign of God’s possession of the hearts.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The ‘*Ekalu*’ is a Seuctic language that was used to large from approximately the 28<sup>th</sup> Century before Christ until 1 D.A.

## ***SIXTH: THE CHURCH OF THE NEW TESTAMENT***

By this stage, the “House of God” has entered a new phase, whereby the symbol has realised its fullness. Looking back, it is envisage that ever since the dismissal from Paradise, God has prepared man by every conceivable way, to accept His existence among people. Ultimately, the divine incarnation fulfilled such an aim, not only as God’s residence among the people, but also establishing His unity with them, for “the Word became man”.

In view of this new position that we have been granted by the divine incarnation, we no longer evaluate the church by its size, building materials or icons. Instead, the Incarnated Lord is transfigured in front of our eyes, so that we recognise the church as “Christ’s Body”. Extending in the life of the human race, it includes all temple corners, widens to embody the heavens, and transfers us above the limits of time. Moreover, according to Hermas from the second century, it existed in God’s mind before creation, and because of her, He created the world<sup>(1)</sup>. In the same context St. Irenaeus<sup>(2)</sup> at the end of the second century, also looked at the Church as the “Body of the Great and glorified Christ”, who ascended to heaven.

This is the new temple that to which the Lord drew our attention when He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days

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(1) Shepherd vis 4 :1.

(2) Ad. Haer 5,32 : 2; 5 : 34 : 1.

I will raise it up again.... But the temple He was speaking of, was His own Body”. (Jn. 2: 19, 20).

As a result, God’s dwelling among His people in the past has been replaced by His Incarnation. His Body and Blood are offered to them so that they may abide in Him and unite with Him as branches in the One Vine. They become “members of His Body”. A temple of God, as the Apostle says, “Whereas the man who unites Himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God!” (1 Cor. 6: 17-19).

Through such a concept of faith, the “Church of the New Testament” holds a distinctive sanctity in the believers’ eyes, for the Church Building is correlated with the holy Body of Christ as well as with the members of the Congregation. For this reason, on entering the church they kiss its steps, doors, icons and kneel before the sanctuary as if before God Himself.

The Ecclesiastical history gives others countless examples of believers readily giving up their own life to secure churches, sacred vessels or church books from the hands of unbelievers. They acknowledged the close bond between such things and the Lord Himself... Every slackness towards them bears a direct dishonour to God. Consequently, nobody can claim the authority to sell them, even if it is he who has offered them in the first place. The same applies to the minister in charge of the church. This is because the building is related to God and has become His own possession.

## ***SUMMARY***

In brief, the idea of building the “House of God”, has evolved throughout sacred history, in accordance with man’s ability to comprehend the essence of “Meeting with God and attaining unity with Him”, coupled with its application in his daily life.

It began with elementary, mobile forms of altars underlining that Sacrifice is the reconciliation with God.

Then Bethel was introduced, to announce the openness of heaven towards the earth as an unshakeable evidence of God’s eagerness to be present with His children, particularly during hard times.

Later on, divine instructions were given to prepare the tabernacle so as to meet with this people and lead them through the wilderness on the way to Jerusalem.

Next the temple was built in Jerusalem, as a symbol of God’s kingdom in the lives of His people.

Finally, came the church of the New Testament, founded not on visions and symbols, but upon the divine act i.e. the Word was incarnated. Here, our relation with God commenced a new phase in which we became qualified to enjoy the new life and to be transferred to heaven to participate in His glories.

This is the new church that, within its building, gathers the holy Body of Christ the Head together with its members. The Head leads the various members through the Holy Spirit, and the members attain their right to unite with one another through their belonging to the same Head.



## **CHAPTER 2**

# **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND CHURCH LIFE**

# **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND THE CHURCH COMMUNITY**

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The church, being God's house, is naturally the dwelling of God with His people, in them and for their interest.

In the church, Christ meets the members of His Body in order that He may practice His divine and redeeming deed in their life. Thus ultimately, through His Holy Spirit, their new life is formed as a holy, living and active community, possessing the characteristics of their Head, without losing human features.

In other words, the church building provides such an adequate environment for the formation of this heavenly community surviving on earth. They live on a "heavenly-earthly" level, if we can tolerate such an expression - heavenly due to being members of the Body of the Heavenly Christ and the fact that in them dwells the Heavenly Holy Spirit. At the same time, moreover they are human by nature and not isolated from the world. From every nation and every tongue they are gathered as a sanctified leaven, acting constantly for the renewal of the world so that it may enjoy the experience of the new life in Jesus Christ.

In view of such an understanding, the correlation between the church building and its congregation, in the Orthodox concept, becomes evident. It even goes to the extent that we do not differentiate between one and the other; they support and lend value to each other. The church community

constructs the church building as an oblation of love to God, who accepts it, sanctifies it, and turns it into his heavenly and holy temple. Within it the community, in its Eucharistic form, receives God's mysteries and gifts in order to become the active and living body of Christ.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING IN THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY**

No doubt, the modern trends in architecture have had a distinct influence on church buildings and, in turn, have ignored the essence of church beliefs. However, some of the western architects have realised this defect and asserted the significance of combining architectural development with church beliefs.

R. Schwarz<sup>(1)</sup> reckons that the construction of church buildings is a holy accomplishment and should be founded not purely on architectural bases, but also on authentic sacred facts of creed.

Robert Maguire also speaks about constructing church building, which do not conform to the spirit of the church. He says<sup>(2)</sup> :

“If you are going to build a church,  
you are going to create a thing which speaks.  
It will speak of meanings, and of values.  
And if it speaks of the wrong values it will go on -  
destroying!  
There is responsibility here!”.

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(1) In Exod. Hom 9.

(2) De Princi 10,2.

To the same effect, Hommond<sup>(1)</sup> discusses the role of the building in creating the church community throughout future generations in his book “Toward Church Architecture” by saying that we erect the buildings, and they in turn build our children.

Otta Senn also says<sup>(2)</sup> : “The problem of the construction of a church cannot be solved by technical knowledge and architecture alone. The arrangement of the stones has a direct relation with the upbuilding of the community and vice versa. It forms part of the work of ministry, and the building up of the body of Christ. (Eph. 4: 12)”.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND ECCLESIASTICAL FEATURES**

In the Orthodox Church, the building conveys the confirmation of the features of the church. That is, as the church in its true entity is the fruit of the unity between two elements - divine and human, eternal and finite, heavenly and earthly - the church building should bear the same philosophy by being the outcome of the interaction between the divine act and the human act; the heavenly features with the earthly truth.

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(1) Sermons on N.T.Lessons 7.6.

(2) Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty : St. John Chrysostom : Ministry in Life, October 1967, p.21.

Thus, despite the fact that people use such finite materials as land, stones, bricks, wood, gold and silver and utilise architecture designs decorating arts, and painting etc., the building will not possess its ecclesiastical features unless it receives the Holy Spirit, who grants it a heavenly nature.

This is our view of the nature of the church, which is considered as either a congregation or a building. The house of God, in fact, is the net result of the work of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with human abilities and architectural facilities in its design and construction as well as in its decoration.

The church as a congregation as well as a building could be analogous to God's garment which belongs to Him. Although maintaining its materialistic nature, it shines with the divine glory during the transfiguration.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND THE CHURCH'S ROLE**

The church building does not only confirm the nature of the church community, but it also reveals, simply, its dogmas and roles.

For example, a quick glance at the church building suggests immediately her role as a loving mother for sinners. She embraces them and guides them step by step towards the east, from the chorus of catechumen and the penitent to that of believers, then to the holy sanctuary. She invites them to the joys of partaking of the divine sacraments and their entry to the heavenly throne by the merit of the blood shed on the Cross.

This is probably one of countless examples that we hope to cover as we go along the book.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND THE CHURCH BUILDERS**

In order that the ecclesiastical building be enabled to carry out its role, by realistically expressing characteristics of the church, its beliefs and worship, it is essential that the people in charge of constructing church buildings be effective members filled with the ecclesiastical spirit. They ought to be active stones founded on their living Christ and with a genuine apostolic spirit thus the outcome of their work is marked by the same spirit.

In other words it is not sufficient to have building expertise, whether in the fields of architectural design or construction or to be knowledgeable in the church theology and the latest trends of architecture, but both the designer and constructor ought to be spiritual, conducting their personal lives according to the ecclesiastical spirit. This was clearly acknowledged in constructing the tabernacle. In spite of God's direct involvement in dictating all its details, He assigned the job of preparing it to a man with such a reputation that God said about him, "See, Yahweh has singled out Bezalel son of Uri... He has filled him with the spirit of God and endowed him with skill and perception and knowledge of every kind of craft: of the art of designing and working in gold and silver and bronze; of cutting stones to be set, of carving in wood, of every kind of craft", (Exod. 31:1-5) (See Exod. 35:31; 36:1).

Analogous to the sanctification that the priest receives upon commencing his pastoral activities, and the theologian in his study, the people working in God's house should be sanctified and prepared for such a holy task. In fact, they do not merely lay stones and design decorations, but they truly participate in a divine work under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit.

# **THE CHURCH BUILDING AND LITURGICAL LIFE**

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No doubt, the church building is correlated with the church community, bears its spirit, reveals its entity and supports it in accomplishing its goals. It is natural, therefore, that the building plays a meaningful role in realising the liturgical aspects of the church community, ie. in practising its liturgical life.

Let us then ask, what is meant by “Liturgical life”, or the “Liturgical form of the church”?

Liturgies consist of formal public worship; eg., services of the seven Sacraments and other types of public worship. In this worship, the church offers her love to the Father, through her unity with the Only-Begotten Son, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As a result, she receives from Him the “mystery of her existence” and enjoys the continuous progress and everlasting sanctity, by which she may accomplish her mission of renovating the entire world in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind.

For example, in the liturgy of the Eucharist, the church offers the bloodless sacrifice of the Son, and in turn receives, the mystery of her existence and unity with the Son through the altar.

Similarly, in the liturgy of Baptism, the church presents the candidates as dedicated people for the Lord and consequently accepts them from Him as children of her own, sanctified in the merits of the Blood.

Also in the liturgy of Marriage, the church presents the couple to God, so that their new home becomes His, and that their future children serve in His vineyard. Meanwhile a new church is created by the Holy Spirit which is, truly, a new branch and a living member of the Mother-Church. In fact, by faith, the church lives this liturgy as a bride in the hands of the Messiah, with her Bridegroom, leading her to His conjugal chamber !

In the “liturgy of blessing water”, the church observes her right of placing her feet in the Messiah’s hands. With humbleness to be washed and purified, as was done with the disciples.

In brief, the liturgical act represents a vital part in the church existence. It is, therefore, of equal importance that the church building should be compatible with the liturgical services conducted, and provides the relevant atmosphere of the liturgical worship.

In other words, the church building in the Orthodox concept, is analogous to the lyre that adds melody in harmony with the liturgical worship, and continual hymns of believers. It backs up their service, encourages them and even uncovers mysteries and aims of such worship to them.

We can further illustrate that by examples:

1. Allocating the Baptistry at the utmost west of the church building, near the entrance, and the altar at the extreme east, implies that the entry to our ecclesiastical fellowship can only be achieved as a result of the liturgy of baptism. Its effect are maintained through our life so that we are continuously qualified for partaking of the liturgy of the Altar, where we enjoy the mystery of unity with the Immaculate Messiah !
2. Situating the lectern between the altar and the chorus of believers signifies the degree of importance of God's word in the liturgical life of believers. They simply are unable to approach the mysteries of the altar and liturgies except through the Word of God.
3. Placing the Cross on the top of the Iconostasis and carving it on the doors, crowns of the pillars and every corner of the church, uncovers the practical fellowship side with the Crucified Christ in liturgical life. To us the Cross is the mystery of our worship, the subject of our hymns and the source of our ceaseless engagement with God.

In brief, the authentic church building, as a whole and in every fine detail, its contents and furniture, should be capable of attracting the soul to examine liturgical life and reveal its mysteries to her.

Joseph Rykwert, spoke about the relationship between the building and liturgy, in his book “CHURCH BUILDING” by saying<sup>(1)</sup> :

Liturgy is the living movement around which a church building is a shell or a shelter, and so it is inevitable shaped and moulded by the movement of the liturgy ...

In the liturgy, in the prayer which commemorates our Lord’s deeds on earth, the church remembers particularly the passion, resurrection and the ascension. Each of these is recollected not only in the words of the celebrant but in some physical feature of the church, inanimate physical features which act in harmony with the movements of the living worshippers, so that the altar itself which is often shaped like a sarcophagus, commemorates the Lord’s sufferings, death and burial...

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<sup>(1)</sup> J. Rykwert : church building ( Faith and Fact Books ) P 9, 10.

# THE CHURCH BUILDING AND HEAVENLY LIFE

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The church building could not be valued as a more architectural design reflecting certain religious feelings. It is above all, associated with the community and is bound to reveal its heavenly character and be capable of releasing the human soul to the divine throne to share with the heavenly creatures in their eternal liturgies.

Referring back to the days of the Old Testament, when the tabernacle was built as a shadow of heavenly things, it would not be surprising to come across some believers who surpassed the materialistic bounds of the tabernacle. Through it, they approached heaven and met God, and loved Him. This fact was expressed by Origen commenting on the words of David, “When I remember these things, I pour out my soul: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the House of God”. (Ps. 42: 4). He says,<sup>(1)</sup> “What dwelling place is that which David remembers and about which he pours out his soul, longing for it, in love as strong as death! Is it the one which is made of leather, scarlet, blue and purple? Doubtless David’s insight was totally different! Cast away from you all earthly bonds and come, walk in the way which the prophets and apostles have prepared for you... And above all act according to the word of God from all your heart and understanding, so that ultimately you may ascend to heaven and contemplate the

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<sup>(1)</sup> In Exod. Hom 9.

wonders of the eternal dwelling place of which Moses explained only the shadow.

Such was David's perception of the House of God long ago. He knew how to come close to heaven through her shadow; the tabernacle... As for us, we entered the heavenly places themselves (Heb. 9:23), and enjoyed the temple that is not made with hands (Heb. 9:11), and resided in the city that God established (Heb. 11:16)! In our new temple, heaven became exposed, and direct communication between its highest of holies and humble earthly ones was made possible.

Truly, the church of the New Testament is the entrance to the heavenly life, or its pledge... and to that extent the building should conform. The ecclesiastical historian, Eusebius, says that the visible church is built on the image of the invisible one..., it is heaven on earth! Origen also says,<sup>(1)</sup> "The church is an imitation of the kingdom to come". St. Augustine states<sup>(2)</sup>, "The church of God is heaven..." Fr. Germanus of Constantinople says "The church is heaven on earth, where lives and dwells God, who is higher than heaven... It was prefigured in the Patriarchies, founded on the Apostles... It was foretold by the prophets, adorned by the Hierarchy, sanctified by the Martyrs and its altar is founded on their relics".

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(1) De Princy 10,2.

(2) Sermons on N. T. lessons 7, 6.

Also talking about believers who regularly attend church assemblies, St. Chrysostom says,<sup>(1)</sup> “We have to depart from this holy place as if descending from heaven itself... Show the outside people that you were in the company of the Seraphim, counted with the heavenly creatures, considered as an angelic chorus, talking with God and in the presence of Christ”.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty : St. John Chrysostom : Ministry in Life, October 1967, p. 21.

# THE CHURCH BUILDING AND MYSTICAL LIFE

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The authentic church building is not only an expression of the church consolidated with God and in Him, but it also touches on the inner life of the soul, which is a vivid member of the church as a whole. It indicates God's dwelling in the soul conditioning it for His residence. All that we procure in the building by our external eyes is achieved internally through faith.

This view is clearly noticed in the writings of Origen about the tabernacle. He identifies it in the New Testament, as being established in the heart. All its contents and ritual services declare the mystery of heaven with his soul. A wave of fear ran through him, and he said,<sup>(1)</sup> "As I examine myself to study these things I find that my courage fails me due to the owe of these mysteries".

Origen could only feel zealous due to the attitude of the people of God towards building the tabernacle. Everyone was so eager to offer generously whatever possible, each according to his ability and resources. He experienced the urge to participate in establishing God's spiritual tabernacle within himself, and said<sup>(2)</sup> :

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(1) Origen, in Exod. Hom 13.

(2) Ibid hom 9.

“O Lord Jesus Christ, will you make me worthy to partake in building your house!

I yearn to present gold for your mercy-seat cover (Exod. 25:17), or to the ark of testimony, the candlestick or the lamp!

If I have no gold, permit me to offer silver for the frames and their sockets (Exod. 26:25).

Grant me, my Lord, to give precious stones to decorate the ephod and breastplate of the high priest.

If I possess nothing of that, allow me to offer goats' hair for your house, so that I may not be counted as barren or unfruitful.

Come, let us build the tabernacle of Jacob's God, Jesus Christ our Lord, and adorn it!

Once again Origen associates between the tangible external house of God and the one residing in the heart, and comments<sup>(1)</sup>, The Lord illustrated the mystery of building the tabernacle through His words to Moses: “You establish a dwelling place for me, so that I may abide among you”.

God loves that we should build Him a place of residence, and in return we are given promises to visualise Him.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid hom 9.

God's dwelling place that He wishes us to erect, it is made up of sanctity that we are requested to attain... Consequently, everybody, can found a tabernacle for God in his heart. Its ten curtains (Exod. 26:1) refer to the fulfilment of the ten commandments.

Examining the tabernacle closely, the purple, the blue, the fine-twined linen... etc. symbolise the variety of good deeds.

Gold refers to faith (Rev. 23:18).

Silver to preaching (Ps. 12:6).

Brass to patience.

Timber that does not rot to the acquaintance that the believer gains in the uninhabited wilderness and the everlasting chastity;

“Linen to virginity,

Purple to loving martyrdom.

Scarlet to the brightness of love.

Blue to hope in the heavenly kingdom.

From all these materials, the tabernacle is built”.

In order to assemble the tabernacle, the frame (Exod. 26: 8-25) of virtues have to be sought! frames of silver, ie., frames of patience and wisdom...

It is supported and decorated by pillars of silver, ie., openness of the heart.

Strengthened by broads (Exod. 235: 11), ie., directing the entire heart to enjoy God and meditate upon Him.

Settled on silver sockets, ie., our life is based on the word of God preached by His Apostles and Prophets.

Its boards are covered with gold, ie., our life is protected with faith in Christ.

Ten curtains are set up in the heart, ie., it is widened without limits.

Origen emphasises that the rites conducted within the tabernacle and the church should take place mystically in the soul. He demonstrates this by saying: “The soul should have an altar right in the centre of the heart. On it sacrifices of prayer and burnt offerings of mercy are offered. Thus, bullocks of pride are slaughtered with the knife of meekness, and arms of anger, goats of luxuries and passions are killed.

Let the soul know how to establish a permanently illuminating lampstand, right in the Holy of Holies of her heart!”



This is simplified coverage explaining the extent to which the church building is related to ecclesiastical life on both the community level and the personal level... Now we wish to examine the architectural aspects of the early church buildings in order to get a feel for its spiritual concepts and that are relevant to our life.

## **CHAPTER 3**

# **THE CHURCH BUILDING IN THE EARLY CENTURIES**

# **THE EARLY WORSHIPPING HOUSES**

## **THE CHURCH & THE TEMPLE**

In the early days of the Church, Christians of Jewish Origin continued to attend the daily services of the Temple (Acts 2: 41) and of the synagogues. They participated in the Jewish liturgies with all their hymning and psalms, petitions and prayers. In so doing they resembled our Lord Jesus Himself, who regularly attended the synagogues on the Sabbath, and was recorded to have gone to Jerusalem for the Passover; towards the end of His ministry.

Such contact with the Temple was maintained by the Apostles as is clearly indicated in the Book of Acts when the Apostles Peter and John went to the Temple to participate in the Canonical Prayers (3:1; 5:1), and when the Apostle Paul entered it when he returned to Jerusalem (22: 17). It served as a vital element in the preaching of Christ among the Jews and Gentiles, for the synagogues outside Jerusalem contained both of them (Acts 13: 48, 14: 1, 18: 4).

It is worth mentioning that ever since the formation of the Church, ie., from the time of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the Upper-room, Christians have had their own worship which they have practised side by side with the Jewish One<sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> J. G. Davies: Early Christian church, 1965, p 57, 58.

## THE HOUSE-CHURCH

A point of major historical interest is that the newly-born church conducted her assemblies and activities in rooms set aside for that purpose, normally, in the upper-roof of the houses which was usually the largest and not least use. Meetings took place to study the word of God, practice sacramental worship and discuss pastoral affairs.

In many cases, wealthy converts totally placed their upper-rooms at the disposal of the community, and often they piously felt that once a building was used for such sacred purposes, it should no longer return to secular uses. Thus many houses were entirely given to the church, where its main room was utilised as a church and the rest of it as a living place for the bishop or clergy or for other ecclesiastical usage.

Given examples of these churches are:

1. The upper-room of St. Mary, the mother of the Apostle Mark, which witnessed several major incidents, and had a distinct importance, such as :

- \* The Lord instituted the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
- \* The Disciples assembled on Easter Eve (John 20: 19), and on the following Sunday (John 20: 26).

- \* St. Matthias was elected for Apostleship (Acts 1: 15), the seven deacons were ordained (Acts 6: 6) and the first church council was held (Acts 15: 4-6).
  
- \* The Disciples gathered daily since Christ's Ascension, till the Pentecost. Afterwards weekly meetings were held to celebrate the Eucharist. A meeting was also called for prayers when St. Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12: 12).

It is believed that the entire house was later handed over to the church, and was called "The Church of the Apostles". It remained functional until the fourth century, and was rated as the most honourable church in Jerusalem.<sup>(1)</sup> . Apparently it was the same "Church of Apostles" that St. Cyril of Jerusalem referred to, as being the Upper-room<sup>(2)</sup> .

2. The Book of Acts mentions that St. Paul celebrated the Eucharist and exhorted the brethren on the third floor (Upper-room) of a house in Troas (20: 8, 9). The Apostle also tells about Aquila and Priscilla and "the church which was in their house". (1 Cor. 16: 19).

3. In a letter related to Pius, Bishop of Rome (142- 157); he states that the pious widow Euprepis relinquished her house for the Church.

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(1) Cutts : History of Early Christian Art, 1893, p. 11.

(2) St. Cyril of Jerusalem:Cat. Lect. 16:4.

4. In a passage of the Clementine Recognitions<sup>(1)</sup>, a certain Patron named Maro put his palace, in which the garden could house near to five hundred persons, at the disposal of St. Peter. Later, as Maro was ordained by the same Apostle, as Bishop of Tripolis, the entire house was transformed to a church and bishop's residency.

5. The same document states that during the first week of St. Peter's preaching in Antioch, over ten-thousand converts were baptised. There, a wealthy man named Theophilus dedicated the immense hall of his palace as a church. Within, he provided a chair **cathedral**<sup>(2)</sup> for the Apostle Peter, where massive numbers gathered daily to hear his words. Eventually the entire palace was fully utilised for church purposes when Theophilus was ordained as a Bishop.

6. St. Gregory, Bishop of Tours, recorded that Leocadius offered his house to the church of Bourges<sup>(3)</sup> in the middle of the third century.

7. The Acts of St. Pontus relates that in his childhood as he was wandering about the streets of Rome, at dawn, sounds of people singing psalms and emerging from an upper-room of one of the houses attracted his attention. He walked up the stairs and knocked on the door, and was answered by one of the inhabitants who had regarded him. However, Bishop Pontianus

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(1) Clementine Recognitions 4: 6.

(2) Ibid 10:17.

(3) Hist. Fr. 1:29.

(230- 235) spotted the boy and ordered him in; “for such”, he said, “is the Kingdom of God”.

## **ESTABLISHING CHURCH BUILDING**

A point of major interest is that the over riding idea that Christians were driven to conduct their worship in secrecy, in catacombs and other hidden places, as a result of the constant persecution during the first three centuries of Christianity, does not conform to facts.<sup>(1)</sup> Surely, at the very beginning the Roman Empire interpreted Christianity as being a Jewish movement and kept away from their disputes regarding it as internal religious affairs, which is apparent from the course of the Lord’s trials and the Book of Acts.<sup>(2)</sup> This situation enabled the Church to conduct public meetings and construct church buildings with limited constraints. To that effect, Tertullian confirms in his book “**Apologeticus**” the Christianity is standing under the shadow of the illustrious religion of the Jews, a religion undoubtedly allowed by laws.<sup>(3)</sup>

Not until 161 AD did the Roman persecution go into its formal phase, and it varied in severity between the various Emperors and rulers, and even varied from time to time. This can easily be deduced from the letter of Pliny the Younger (about 111 A.D.), ruler of Bethynia to his master Emperor Trajan, inquiring about his position towards the Christians.

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<sup>(1)</sup> J. G. Davies: Origin and Development of Early Christian Church Architect. N.Y. 1953, p. 12.

<sup>(2)</sup> Mark 15:9-15, Acts 18:12-17.

<sup>(3)</sup> Tertul. Apologeticus, 1,20. See: G Baldwin Brown: From Schola to Cathedral, Edinburgh 1886, p 11.

This letter proclaims that there was no official law to persecute them, in spite of the existence of persecution unofficially for twenty years.

It has been historically established that a number of Roman Emperors and rulers showed noticeable interest in Christians for example:

1. Alexander Severus (222- 235) AD kept a statue of Christ among other statues of great religious leaders in his private oratory, and he displayed an interest in Christianity.
2. Philip the Arabian (244- 249) AD was so friendly with Christians that he was suspected of being a secret convert.
3. Gallienus Valerian suspended his father's persecution against Christians and granted them liberty of worship, which led suspicion that his wife Salonina was a Christian.
4. Even Diocletian himself demonstrated remarkable kindness to Christians, during the first twenty years of his reign (284- 305) AD

From all the above, we can conclude that, in general, during the first three centuries the situation was not entirely dim. Christians had reasonable opportunities to special worship houses. In fact, unshakeable evidence verifies the existence of such houses (Churches) in both the East and the West.

## EXAMPLES OF CHURCH BUILDING:

1. Reference is made to Christian architecture found as early as the second century, for the Chronicle of Arbela, written by Mesihazekha about 550 AD and based on the record of Habel (171: 200) AD was responsible for building a church<sup>(1)</sup> .
2. St. Hippolytus reports in his commentary on the book of Daniel<sup>(2)</sup>, that enemies of Christians attacked the house of God, while the believers were in the middle of their prayers.
3. In the writings of both St. Clement of Alexandria<sup>(3)</sup> and Origen<sup>(4)</sup>, references were made to consecrated churches.
4. The Chronicle of Edessa mentions the flood in 205 A.D. which destroyed, among other things, the Temple of Christians at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates<sup>(5)</sup> .
5. In 258 AD St. Gregory Thaumaturgus built a church in Pontus at Neo-Caesarea, and this same church was ordered to be surrendered to the Orthodox party<sup>(6)</sup> by emperor Aurelian in 270 AD

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<sup>(1)</sup> Davies: Origin & Develop. p 14.

<sup>(2)</sup> Hippolyt., Daniel 1,20. Baus: Handbook of Church History  
Vol 1, p.286.

<sup>(3)</sup> Clem. Alex., Storm. 7:5:29,4.

<sup>(4)</sup> Origen: Oratione 31:5.

<sup>(5)</sup> Chroricum Edessum 4:3.

<sup>(6)</sup> Eusebius: H. E. 7:30.

6. At Nicomedia, the Eastern Capital itself, a church was built opposite to the imperial palace and when Diocletian ordered its destruction they had to use axes and crowbars, since any attempt to burn it would endanger the surrounding buildings<sup>(1)</sup> .

7. Fr. Gregory the Illuminator organised the foundation of three church buildings at Etchmiadzin, about 300 A.D. Furthermore, due to his preaching, Armenia adopted Christianity as the National religion, before the times of Constantine<sup>(2)</sup> .

## **AS FOR WESTERN CHURCHES:**

1. Tertullian witnesses the existence in church buildings of North Africa, in the second century, and says<sup>(3)</sup>: “Our dove (Church) dwells in a simple house, always on a high place, openly and in full day light”.

2. In a letter to Pius of Rome, he states that the presbyter Flix was assigned a “titulus” (Parish Church), ie., a permanent church to which priests were appointed and which might not be abandoned<sup>(4)</sup> .

3. During the reign of Alexander Severus (222-235) AD a dispute arose between Roman Christians and the guild of popinarii (taverners) regarding ownership of the plot of land. The first party wished to build a church on it, while the other

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(1) Lactant. De Mortibus Persecutorum, ch 12.

(2) Cutts, p 36.

(3) Tert. De Fug 3, De Idols 7, De Pudic 4, De Spect 25.

(4) Cutts, p 31.

party wanted it for a tavern . The Emperor’s decision came in favour of the Christians on the grounds that worshipping God in any form is preferred to licensing a tavern<sup>(1)</sup> . Tradition records that such a church was founded and dedicated by Bishop Callistus. It is now known as the Church of St. Maria at Trastavere.

4. Optatus of Milevuis certifies that early in the fourth century, forty churches existed in Rome, twenty-five in the city and fifteen in suburban areas<sup>(2)</sup> .



Now, we can confidently state that during the first three centuries of Christianity, worship was conducted in dwellings specially constructed for that purpose and not in private houses. As numbers of believers multiplied, the necessity of rebuilding larger places became unavoidable and these small dwelling were pulled down. To that effect, the historian Eusebius says:<sup>(3)</sup> “How could one fully describe those assemblies thronged with countless men, and the multitudes that gathered in every city ... by reasons of which they were no longer satisfied with buildings of older times, and would erect from foundations, of churches on spacious dimensions throughout all the cities”?!

Lactantius also says<sup>(4)</sup> , “By the end of the Diocletantius persecution, frequenters of churches had so increased that they

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(1) Lampriduis, Vita Alex. 1949.

(2) Gallinus, Vita Alex. 1949.

(3) Eusebius: H.E. 8:1.

(4) Lactantius: Del Mortibus Persec., ch 12

pulled down the ancient churches and rebuilt them from the foundations, on larger and grander dimensions in all cities”.

## **THE STYLE OF EARLY CHURCH BUILDINGS**

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In the Old Testament, as believers were in their spiritual childhood, it was natural that God should take upon Himself the responsibility of dictating all relevant details of the “House of God”; its shape, size, building materials, contents... and He even went to the extent of naming those in charge of its construction. Ultimately, as we reached the stage of spiritual maturity, in the New Testament, God considered it sufficient to grant us His Holy Spirit to guide us in all aspects of our life. As a result, church designs were developed in accordance with Christ’s teachings and in a manner capable of backing up our liturgical worship and bearing the heavenly features.

In other words, God not enforce any architectural style, specific language or culture for His Church. He wished it to be in the form of a spiritual structure for believers of diverse background and cultures: Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Syrians... etc.

Now, if God has granted us the full liberty of selecting whichever architectural style we find suitable, then what style did the church adopt in its first three centuries?

I believe that the answer to this question is somewhat obscure, particularly when church buildings were subjected to destruction due to successive imperial edicts in the Roman Empire. Even when the pressure was off the church, at the time of Constantine, Bishops were compelled to build more spacious churches and notify their architecture in order to cope with the growing numbers of converts.

However, we can focus the light on some of the influential factors that left their imprints on the style of churches during that time:

## **1. THE TEMPLE**

When early Christians were forcibly dismissed from the temple, its character remained strongly in their innermost hearts, but in a spiritual understanding, adequate for their new position of being “the New Israel”. Consequently their churches were copied from the temple, or tabernacle, not in a deadly literalism, but sustaining its mysteries and spirit.

A quick glance at the church and tabernacle sketched below clarifies such correspondence. The church sanctuary is analogous to the Holy of Holies; the nave to the Holy, the Narthex to the courtyard. The laver is fully realised in the Baptistry site and the Altar of burnt offering is fulfilled by the New Testament...etc.

## **2. THE ROMAN COURT LAW**

Some architects believe that Roman Laws Court represented one of the dominate factors that influenced the

early church architectural<sup>(1)</sup> particularly in West Europe. They were recorded to follow the “Basilica”, style, or “imperial” style, in Greece, as if the building was dedicated to the King of Kings<sup>(2)</sup> .

The normal scene in these courts represented the judge occupying his seat, among his assessors and assistants at the apse of the basilica. This was transformed to depict the bishop sitting on his throne (cathedral), and surrounded by his presbyters, which resembles, in fact, Christ and His Disciples in the eyes of the Christian.

On the other hand, other architects confirm that no connection whatsoever exists between the Roman Basilica, in the form of court laws or ordinary houses, and church Basilica. They regard the latter to have its own independent origin<sup>(3)</sup> .

### **3. THE PAGAN TEMPLE**

Many pagan temples lent themselves to the access of Christians, as a result of being deserted by converted pagans. However, Christians tended to be cautious not to adopt any of their pagan spirit. Instead, they were inclined to modify them to suit their own theological and spiritual beliefs. For example pagan temples, in general, were never meant to accommodate the assembled worshippers, since they were strictly “house of

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(1) Rekyart: Church Building.

(2) Sir Fletcher: Hist. of Architectures, 1946, p. 214.

(3) M. Gilbert Scott: Essay on the history of English Church Architecture.

deity”, but Christians converted them to “Houses of God, who dwells among the people”. To that effect, Cutts recorded<sup>(1)</sup> :

Some of the unused temples of the ancient gods were ultimately converted into churches, but the ordinary plan of a temple was not well adapted to the uses of the Christian assembly. The ancient worship was an outdoor worship. The altar was placed at the base of the porticos front of the temple. As the people stood assisting at the sacrifice, the pillared facade of the temple formed a background to the altar and ornamental screen for the cells behind, in which the deity was supposed to be present. Since the cells was not intended to contain a body of worshippers, it was comparatively small and dark... The church is intended to enclose the whole body of the worshippers within its ample area...”.

However, there were exceptions mentioned also by Cutts, such as the temples of Parthenon at Athens and Jupiter at the Capital of Rome, where senate meetings were held.

At any rate, whenever a temple was utilised as a church, relevant changes were required:

**A.** Some temples which contained sufficient cells area to cope with the assembled congregation, were adapted to correspond to the Christian ecclesiastical spirit.

**B.** Others were pulled down and use was made of their columns and other useable materials, to construct church buildings.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Cutts: History of Early Christian Art, London 1893, p. 56.

C. Other cases involved removing the cells and erecting walls between the columns enclosing the cells form a church.

The author of “Symbolism of churches and church ornaments” discusses the transfer of pagan temples to Christian churches, and commented:<sup>(1)</sup>

“Socrates (H.E. 4: 22) in his description of the conversion of a pagan island to Christianity, about 380 A.D., and turning the temple into a church says, “The guise of the temple they transformed unto the type (or pattern) of a church”. And also in a passage from Sozomen (H.E. 7: 15) “the temple of Dionysus which they had, was changed to be fitting (guise) to a church”. These passages mean that there was some type of church, and that it was not merely ejection of idols that was required to turn a pagan temple into a church”.

#### **4. THE CATACOMBS**

The term “catacomb” is associated with subterranean early Christian burial-places, and was probably derived from the Greek word “**KATA-COMBAS**” which means “at the ravine”.

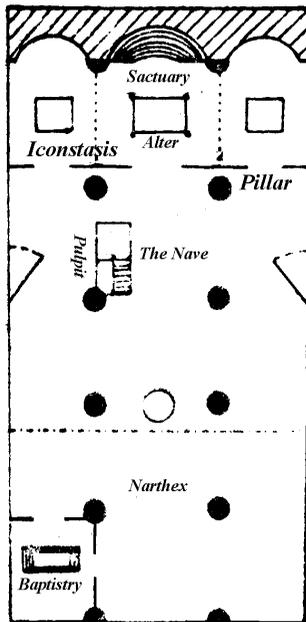
According to the Roman law, the dead were disposed of outside city walls, so catacombs were normally built nearby the suburban roads. They were regarded as “sacrosanct”, and in turn, should not be assaulted by law. Naturally they were inhabited by Christian worshippers during persecution times in

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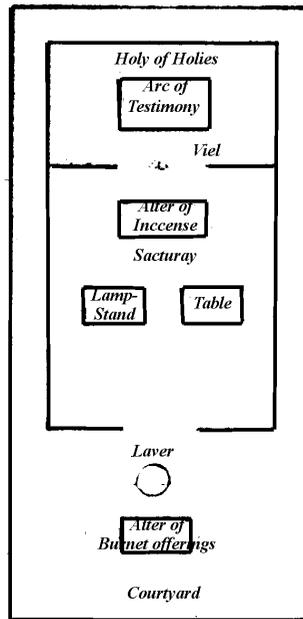
<sup>(1)</sup> Durandus: Symbolism of Churches and church Ornaments Rational Divinorum officorum, London 1906.

various places, specially in Rome. One could gather a good deal about the Christian art of that period from the various paintings on the walls and window glass. When Christianity became the official religion many of these catacombs were renovated.

*The Church*



*The Tabernacle*



# **CHAPTER 4**

## **CHURCH BUILDINGS AND ALEXANDRIA**

It is most certain, that Egypt played a vital role in the life of the Early Church. Its capital, then Alexandria, was one of most distinguished cities of the Roman Empire, a reputable centre of the Greek (Hellenistic) culture, and a resort of poets, philosophers and mathematicians from all over the world.<sup>(1)</sup> More than any other city, whether in the East or in the West, Alexandria provided the adequate potential for the contact between Christianity and Hellenism, and due to its Theological School, was able to attract philosophers to the new faith and create great Fathers to Christendom.

At the same time, the sands of Egypt also witnessed the birth of the monastic movement, with all its types, and form where it spread in no time to both the East and the West. Thus at the very time when the world accepted Christianity as the official religion, and the rulers began to interfere with church affairs, the angelic life of the simple Egyptian monks attracted to many philosophers and imperial members.

Even till our present day, sayings and writings of the Early Egyptian Fathers, whether they were bishops, abbots, monks or teachers, are of great interest to theologians and patrologists . They represents a rich source of knowledge about the theology, doctrines, dogmas, and attitudes of the Early Church.

Now we are bound to query the role which Christian Egypt has played in church architecture.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Clarke C.P.S. : Short History of Christian Church, London 1948, p. 40.

In great sorrow, we must admit that we are in pressing need of additional effort to be spent in that field, since a good deal of Coptic monuments are yet to be discovered. To that effect Dr. Aziz Sourial Atya states<sup>(1)</sup> , “Though many ancient Coptic monuments suffered greatly from hostile incursions and many more fell into disuse and were ruined, a representative number of monastic and church structures have survived in their early original forms. Consequently, the archaeologist has been able to reconstruct a fair picture of the essentials of Coptic architecture. Literature on this interesting facet of Coptic history had been growing steadily, but much remains to be done on the sites and mounds which fill the length and breadth of the Nile valley. Some of these are known, but unexcavated, while innumerable others are still undiscovered and untouched”.

It is not worthy that church buildings in Egypt were exposed to a number of successive waves of demolition, destruction, and burning, sometimes by pagans and at other times by rulers such as the Romans, Nelickens, Mamelukes, Turks... etc. Not a single church in the whole of Alexandria could be related to the first three centuries. Even the ancient churches of Old Cairo, and other monuments of Upper and Lower Egypt are known to be built sometime after the third century.

However, despite the above facts, architects confirm that Egypt must have possessed a good collection of large and valuable churches, and distinctly influenced the architecture and arts of the Early church.

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<sup>(1)</sup> A.S. History of Eastern Christianity, P. 136.

In this context, J. A. Hamilton says <sup>(1)</sup>, “Alexandria, a great and flourishing city, had long before exercised a powerful sway on the formation of Christian art, and must have had numerous churches of great size and beauty. All have disappeared...

Egypt must have had splendid churches, but most of the extant ones are small and of poor materials.

Rkywart also says,<sup>(2)</sup> “The contribution of Alexandria to the general development of church architecture is very difficult to estimate; Alexandrian churches unlike those of Constantinople were not simply Altered by the upcoming invaders to suit their use but were mostly destroyed or rendered unrecognisable. We know much more about the Alexandrian element in Christian art, particularly the Alexandrian contribution to the course of Western painting..., we also know that the miniature and landscape painters of Alexandria had far-reaching effects on the imperial ateliers in Constantinople.

## **“THE CHURCH BUILDINGS” IN EGYPT**

As we touch on this subject, Anianius immediately comes to our minds as, being the first man to embrace the Christian faith due to the preaching of St. Mark in Alexandria. His little house became the first house-church originating from a

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hamilton J. H. : Bizantine Architecture and Decoration, London 1933, p. 80-1.

<sup>(2)</sup> Rykwart Church building, p 63.

home in Egypt, where meetings were held between St. Mark and Christians.

Due to the rising tension with the pagans, and under the tremendous pressure of believers, St. Mark left Alexandria for a while. Upon his return he rejoiced to find that the number of brethren had so multiplied that they were able to build a respectable church in the suburban district of Paucalis<sup>(1)</sup>. That led to the tragedy which took place on the Easter eve of 68 AD when the pagans were so agitated to find that their great temple of Serapis was deserted, while the church at Paucalis was actively crowded. They rushed into the church and seized St. Mark to kill him.

Now we may raise the question: What was the style of this church and other churches built later on in Egypt? Or in other words, what is the style of Coptic Architecture?

In order to answer this question we ought to discuss the relationship between Coptic Architecture and other cultures.

## **1. COPTIC ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURE & THE HELLENISTIC CULTURE**

In this book on the “Origins and development of the Church Architecture” by Davies, regards Alexandria as a great Hellenistic city in the East, a centre of culture and trade, and directly representing the Greek values in arts and architecture<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) Atya p 27.

(2) Davies : Origin & Develop of Early Christian Church Architecture, p.11.

However, it is not right to assume that our architecture bears the Hellenistic style, for the following reasons:

**A.** The Greek trends, as described by Dr. A. Souriel, were essentially aristocratic in character, and accordingly were centred around some suburbs of the capital, as well as in Alexandria, and other Greek towns in the Delta and Fayoum Oasis<sup>(1)</sup> .

**B.** The Copts took pride in their Pharaonic culture which made them act in such a way as to oppose the cultures of various invaders. Thus, in spite of the fact that the invaders, whether they were Greeks, Romans, Persians or Byzantine..., left their marks on the Egyptian culture, it would be a grave error to assume that Egyptian art was affected by any of these at any time.

## **2. COPTIC ARCHITECTURE AND ROMAN BASILICA**

In the book “Ancient churches of Egypt”, by Butler<sup>(2)</sup> , the writer confirms that in spite of the similarity that may seem apparent between our churches and the Basilica style, it is beyond all doubt that Coptic architecture had its own independent origin. It really had nothing to do with Basilica, nor had it copied any of the Roman Basilica features. He assures that our churches are rich with evidence supports Gilbert Scott’s theory that Christian Basilica style is not an extension of the Roman one.

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(1) Atya p 131.

(2) Butler : Ancient Churches of Egypt, vol. 1.

### **3. COPTIC ARCHITECTURE AND THE BYZANTINE STYLE**

The mere fact that our churches are decorated with domes had led some architects to the belief that Coptic architecture is just an off spring of Byzantine art. Their justified argument on the correlation that existed between Alexandria and Byzantium (Constantinople) when the latter became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire.

In fact, Alexandria knew “domes” before Christianity, and as Butler says,<sup>(1)</sup> “domes” originated in the East, and it is more probable that Byzantium borrowed them from Alexandria than the other way around.

In addition, the ancient Coptic church buildings never knew the cruciform design, which was the most preferred Byzantine architectural style.

### **4. COPTIC ARCHITECTURAL & PHARAONIC ARCHITECTURE**

Recent trends in the history of architecture are now beginning to reject the well established ideas that our architecture was only another branch or another form of the Basilica or Byzantine architecture, or a mixture of the two. To that effect Hamilton affirms that Egyptian churches could be categorised as a distinct entity, ie., the “Coptic Architecture”. Its character was dictated by its liturgical and ecclesiastical

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid p5

traditions, and its structure bears the mark of its national feelings.

Now we move on to discuss the factors that influenced the Coptic architecture with respect to its parent architecture; ie. Pharaonic architecture. Dr. Aziz Sourial Atya talks about such a close relationship by saying:<sup>(1)</sup>

“It is not inconceivable, however, that the oldest forms of Coptic churches were derived from their ancestral places of worship, that is, the ancient Egyptian temples. In fact, the spread of the earliest Christianity in Egypt resulted at first in the conversion of the pagan temples into churches. Moreover, numerous instances are reported of Christian ascetics who sought seclusion by living in ancient tombs and funerary shrines<sup>(2)</sup>. Later when the Copts began to erect their own chapels independently, it was normal for their architects to copy the existing temple models of the master builders of antiquity, more especially as these seemed to fulfil the requirement of the new faith during the first four centuries of transition between paganism and Christianity.

The topography of the ancient Egyptian temple has already been shown to have consisted of three main divisions:

**First**, the outer gate led into an open court surrounded by two rows of columns with a narrow stone roofing.

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(1) Atya p.136 - 7

(2) Tertullian : Ad. Idolt. Chp. 3.

**Second**, beyond that huge quadrangle devoted to general worshippers, the hypostyle hall followed. This space was filled with crowded columns in close rows supporting a massive stone roof and reserved for the royal family and the aristocracy.

**The third** section of the temple, at the end, was a closed and rather dimly lit small chamber, wrapped in great mystery. This constituted the inner shrine, the ‘sanctum sanctorum’ or holy of holies, where the deity resided, and which was accessible only to the high priest or Pharaoh.

The primitive Coptic churches appears to have retained this triple division, which may still be witnessed in some of the chapels of the ancient monasteries. The innermost part behind the iconostasis was the sanctuary (haikal) where the priests and deacons alone were admitted to officiate the mystery of the Holy Sacrament. Outside the sanctuary, the central part of the church was reserved for baptised Christians, while a third section at the narthex or entrance was left open for the unbaptised Catechumens ...

At an unknown date, the distinction between the baptised Christian and the Catechumen began to disappear, and with it the divisions of the church gave way to the perpendicular triple sections of nave and aisles. In this way, the Basilica style began to assert itself in Coptic ecclesiastical architecture. St. Mena’s cathedral built by Arcadius (395- 408) in the district of Mareotis near the Delta, the ruins of the magnificent cathedral at Ashmunian, and the Red and White Monasteries of St. Ahenute at Suhag are fourth and fifth - century examples of that

imminent change. On the other hand, the irregularity of church forms in Old Cairo indicated that the basilica style was only slowly adopted as the accepted standard.

In the light of the above, we can claim that our architecture possesses authentic Egyptian feelings. However, by comparison, our churches are far away from being exotic as the Pharaohs temples. It is nowhere as large or as decorated as someone would expect. The following factors could explain such discrepancy:

**A.** The unbroken series of persecution against the Copts and their churches since the first century, prevented them from erecting glorious buildings as those of the Pharaohs.

**B.** The diversity of the way of thinking between the Pharaohs and the Christians. The first believed in preserving their bodies till the return of their souls. Consequently huge pyramids, temples and hidden catacombs were essential for this kind of eschatological attitude. On the other hand, however, this same attitude caused their descendants to sell everything, and practice their worship in small churches. Their overwhelming objective was to seek the glorious heavenly temple, New Jerusalem!

**C.** The rising of the monastic movement in Egypt had affected the priorities of church leaders. Instead of concentrating on fabulous church buildings, their heart were drawn towards the desert and the wilderness. As a result, they encouraged believers to choose the better angelic life of praying. They rejoiced to see thousands of their sons desert

earthly fantasies for the sake of the one aim; which is the fellowship with their Saviour.

**D.** We cannot ignore the cautiousness of all Christendom towards arts during the first two centuries. These arts were as a way back for returning to paganism!!<sup>(1)</sup>

**E.** The immense struggle that took place in Alexandria between the philosophical School and the Christian School obliged the Alexandrian leaders to devote a good deal of their time to defending the new faith and attracting philosophers to Christianity. In other words, the church's greatest concern was to worship, discuss and preach more than to erect buildings.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Tertullian: Ad. Idolt. chp. 3.

# **CHAPTER 5**

## **CHURCH BUILDINGS AND EASTWARD ORIENTATION**

## **EASTWARD ORIENTATION IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

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No doubt, communicating with God is distinguished by its intimate nature. It takes place right within the hearts, where we meet our closest and hidden Friend who dwells in our inner souls. It is by nature, a ceaseless contact that is not bound by time or place it exists at home, on the road, at work, at church ... etc. However this reality must also be coupled with the fact that our God likes discipline and hates disorder. Thus, during our worship whether at His church or at home, we are expected to observe order and discipline.

This explains the reason for orienting our worship towards a certain direction, which is observed both in the Old and New Testaments. Before Christianity, prayers were offered towards the Temple of Jerusalem as the place of the “Presence of God”. On the other hand, the church of the New Testament oriented its liturgical as well as the private devotions towards the East.

According to the Apostolic Constitutions,<sup>(1)</sup> specify that “the church must be oblong in form and pointing to the East”.

Such a tradition was mentioned in the writings of many

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(1) Apostolic Constitutions 2, 57 (61).

early Fathers such as St. Clement of Alexandria,<sup>(1)</sup> Origen,<sup>(2)</sup> Tertullian,<sup>(3)</sup> etc., and was almost invariably observed in early churches.

During the second century, churches in Syria for example used to point out the direction of East to their worshippers by hanging or inscribing a cross on the wall facing them...<sup>(4)</sup>

The apocryphal documents also refer indirectly to this early tradition. We read in the apocryphal “Acts of Apostles”<sup>(5)</sup>, that St. John of Zebede “took a cross of wood and placed it up towards the East and kneeled to pray...”. The same document continues to relate a story that the conversion of a multitude of people by the same Apostle was followed by a prayer towards the East. The people turned their backs to the West and fell down on their faces before the cross to the East. They were weeping and saying : “We worship You, Son of God, who was suspended on the Tree”.

Furthermore, the Liturgy of Baptism also observed such a tradition in the Early Church. First the candidate renounced the Devil and all his works, then he would be asked to face the East to profess his belief in the Holy Trinity<sup>(6)</sup> .

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(1) St.Clement of Alexandria: Storm. 7.

(2) Origen: Hotm 5 in Number. Ch. 4.

(3) Tertullian: Apology 16; AD Nationes 13.

(4) Pocknee: Cross & Crusifix, London 1962, p. 36.

(5) Wright W.: Apocr. Acts of the Apostles, Vol. 2, p 5,32.

(6) Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty: St. Cyril of Jerusalem, his life, and articles.

The orientation, or praying towards the East was very common, and apparently confused the pagans, who misunderstood it. To that effect Tertullian says:<sup>(1)</sup> “Some assumed that the sun is the God of Christians, because it is a well-known fact that we pray towards the East, or perhaps we make Sunday a day of festivity”.

Eastward Orientation was not only observed in liturgical services but also in private prayers. We read about St. Arsanius that he was accustomed to commence his prayer at sunset on Saturday and finish it when the sun shines opposite to him, on the following morning<sup>(2)</sup> .

The Acts of Martyrs and Saints we read that martyrs and saints oriented themselves towards the East on their departure from this world.

Now it is time to query the significance of orientation Eastward during our worship and in constructing our churches.

## **THE THEOLOGY OF “EASTWARD ORIENTATION”**

### **1. CHRIST IS OUR ‘EAST’ :**

It is not unreasonable for us to pray towards the East, for our Christ is called ‘the East’ (Zeck. 6:12), and the ‘Sun of

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<sup>(1)</sup> Tert. Ad Nationes 13.

<sup>(2)</sup> Fathers Vally.

Righteousness and Justice’ who shines continuously upon us to destroy darkness. (Mt 4:2).

In addition, the Early Fathers had some interesting thoughts on this point. For example, Origen says<sup>(1)</sup> that we ought to pray turning East in order to indicate that the soul is oriented towards the dawn of the Light who is the Sun of righteousness and salvation, the Sun who shines upon the New World, ie. the Church.

St. Ambrose also says that during ‘Baptism’ candidates should look towards the East to see Christ face to face...

In brief, we can say that our persistence in Eastward orientation during our worship indicates our eagerness to face the Lord, giving our back to the darkness of sin and earthly pleasure. Thus, whenever we celebrate the liturgy, we hear the deacon exhorting us to “look towards the East to see Emanuel, the body and blood of our God, present upon the Altar”.

## **2. COMMEMORATING THE LOST PARADISE:**

St. Basil the Great says: “It is according to an unwritten tradition that we turn to the East to pray. But little do we know that we are thus seeking the ancient homeland, the Paradise that God planted in Eden, towards the East”.

To the same effect, St. Ephram the Syrian says,<sup>(2)</sup> “The Jews looked to Jerusalem in their prayers, for it was their holy

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(1) Origen: on Prayer 32; Ham 5 in Numb.ch 4. Quasten: Patrology Vol. 2, p 68. Danielou: Origen, N.Y. 1955, p. 29.

(2) St. Basil : The Spirit Sanct. 27

country. As for us, Paradise is our country which was in the East. Therefore we are ordered to look towards the East during our prayers”.

Thus in orienting our churches towards the geographical east and not towards Jerusalem, we have definitely substituted heavenly Jerusalem for the Earthly One.<sup>(1)</sup> The words of Fr. John of Damascus carry the same meaning that eastward orientation refers to our prayer to attain the eternal city.

Lastly, St. Gregory of Nyssa assures that such a theological notion of the soul to repent and seek the kingdom of God in her worship.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **3. WAITING FOR “THE PAROUSIA (advent) OF CHRIST”:**

The eastward orientation is distinctly correlated with the Parousia of the Lord, or His last advent, in which He will escort us to His heavenly kingdom . The Lord declared that His advent looks like the lightning, appears from the East and shines upon the west (Mt. 24: 27). Also on the Lord’s Ascension, the angel informed the disciples that the Son of Man will come again from the East the same as in His ascension. (Acts 1: 11).

It should not be surprising then that the Didascalia Apostolorum states: “For it is required that you pray towards the East, as you know that it is written: Give praise to God,

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(1) Danielou: Bible & liturgy.

(2) Ibid

who rides upon the heavens of heavens towards the East<sup>(1)</sup> .  
(Ps. 68)

Fr. Methodius of Olympia describes the state of the church, oriented towards the East and waiting joyfully for the coming of her Bridegroom by saying:

*From the Brightness of heaven, O virgins,  
the sound of a voice makes itself heard,  
awaking the dead.  
Towards the Bridegroom it says;  
Let us all go in haste,  
clad in our white garments,  
our lamps in our hands,  
to the EAST.*

A similar hymn also written by St. Ephram the Syrian, he says: <sup>(2)</sup>

*When Christ appears from the East,  
His Cross will appear before Him  
like a banner before the King!*

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<sup>(1)</sup> Connolly R.H. *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 1929, p.119-120. Cibson M.: *Horae Semiticae II. The Didascalia Apotorum*, London 1903.

<sup>(2)</sup> Lamy T.J.S. *Ephraem Syre Hymni et Sermones II*. Malines 1886, p 407.

#### **4. SYMBOL OF REBIRTH, HOPE, AND LIGHT:**

St. Clement of Alexandria also links the East spiritual day of rebirth. He comments that every time we stand up for prayer and turn towards the East, we remember the bringing of our new life that we have obtained in baptism.

As a result, at every sunrise believers' hopes are renewed, so that they pray to their God the following words that occur in the prayers of the first hour or prime<sup>(1)</sup> :

*“Let us enjoy a fresh start. ....  
May the light of your face shine upon us,  
and enlighten us with the light of your divine  
knowledge.  
Make us children of Light, children of daytime....  
Enlighten our minds, hearts and our understanding,  
lord of all...”.*

*MORNING PRAYER*

#### **5. LOOKING TOWARDS THE CROSS:**

Another point of interest that has been raised by St. Athanasius is that Christ was facing the west while hanging on the Cross. Thus upon looking towards the East in our prayers, we meet the Crucified Lord face to face.

Perhaps this reasoning explains the tradition of fitting Icons of Christ on the eastern wall of our churches.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The Coptic Orthodox Church, Melbourne 1976 : The Canonical hours.

## **THE EASTWARD ORIENTATION OF GRAVES:**

It is rather interesting to note that the eastward orientation was not only observed in worship and church buildings, but it was also introduced in the old Christian graves. Upon this phenomenon, Jungmann remarks that, majority of the old cemeteries in the villages of his country, ie., in Tyrol and Austria, graves were built in such a way as to orient the dead bodies to face the East. He comments: “The dead therefore are like a large army looking out for Him, who was risen, and waiting His call when He will summon them also to the resurrection. It is certainly a meaningful symbolism. This symbolism was expressed over the entrance of one of the larger cemeteries in Tyrol, by one single word “RESURRECTURIS”<sup>(1)</sup>.

It may well be that the eastward orientation of the dead was copied from the preceding martyrs and saints, who turned in that direction upon departing from the world.

It was said that St. Mary on her departure<sup>(2)</sup>, “turned to the East and prayed in a heavenly language and then lay down, still facing Eastward”.

Once again, the apocryphal “Act of St. Paul”<sup>(3)</sup> records: “Then Paul stood with his face to the East and lifted up his

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(1) Jungmann: Early Liturgy, p.138, 139.

(2) The Assumption of St. Mary, Coptic ( Sehedic) text.

(3) Acts of Paul. Quasten: Patrology, Vol. 1,p 132.

hands unto heaven, and prayed for a long time... and then stretched forth his neck without speaking”.



Now we can understand with the factors that led to the eastward orientation of early church buildings particularly in Egypt. Evidence is readily accessible in the ancient churches of Egypt, upon which Butler remarks that in every case, the orientation of the altar towards the East, is evident beyond any shadow of doubt. However, the conditions of the site could deviate the building slightly from the true East<sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Butler: Ancient Churches of Egypt, vol.2, p.10.

# **CHAPTER 6**

## **THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH BUILDING**

It is not a random outcome that the church building consistently conforms to a specific, well defined shape. For each of the three designs, the cruciform, the circle and the ship, reveals a substantial aspect of the nature of the church, her character and message.

## **1. THE CRUCIFORM**

This design uncovers the church's mystical nature, as being the Crucified Body of Christ. Its prime draw is to take all mankind to Golgotha, in order to gain unity with the Beloved Saviour.

As we have mentioned before, this form was very common in the Byzantine style and was never introduced into Coptic churches. Apparently, as Butler<sup>(1)</sup> reports, Coptic builders were never interested in it and perhaps they never knew about it at all.

## **2. THE CIRCULAR SHAPE**

This design refers to the eternal nature of the church, as being an endless line<sup>(2)</sup> (without beginning and without end)... She bears the nature of her Bridegroom.

Once again, this form is very scarce in Coptic Architecture.

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(1) Butler: The Ancient Churches of Egypt.

(2) Zvegintzov: Our Mother Church.

Now, we shall talk about the third and the most common shape in our Coptic churches, namely the shape of a “SHIP”.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING IN THE FORM OF A SHIP**

### **“THE SHIP IN THE THOUGHT OF THE GENTILES”**

It is rather fascinating to realise that the symbol of the “ship” held a special mystical significance even before Christianity. Various shapes of ships were found inscribed on tombs of Egyptians, Greeks, Romans etc. ..., and also on many of their rings and jewellery. This can only indicate:

1. Their beliefs about immortality<sup>(1)</sup>, for they regarded death as a journey in a ship to the other world, and consequently engraved it on their graves. Later when these people accepted Christianity, the symbol of the ship continued to express their new beliefs, being a symbol of the New Life or the Risen Life in Jesus Christ.<sup>(2)</sup>

2. Their optimistic views on a happy and hopeful trip of the soul in this world and the world to come, which is evident from the shapes and decorations of their rings and jewels.

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(1) Rahner: Greek Myths & Christian Mystery, London 1963, p85-6.

(2) Cope: Symbolism in the Bible & the church London 1959, p35.

3. One other remarkable aspect about the ship is that the Gentiles considered it as a major symbol for the female, since she provides safety for those who are ‘contained’ within her.

They always spoke about it as ‘she’, evidently because it resembles a pregnant mother enclosing the travelling souls to the place of rebirth.<sup>(1)</sup> This realisation actually fits the church which bears her militant children, looks after them till she finally delivers them safely to their heavenly port!

### **THE SYMBOL OF THE SHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Not only did the ship bear a mystical implication to the Gentiles, but the ancient people of God also regarded it as a symbol of God’s salvation and love towards His people. No doubt, Noah’s ark (ship) occupied a substantial status as a shadow of the church of the New Testament this is seen in many of its aspects, especially the following:

1. The EIGHT persons that were saved in the ark of Noah refer to the nature of the saved church. According to St. Augustine<sup>(2)</sup>, number EIGHT means the surpassing of number seven or the days of the week and to starting a new week. Likewise, the people of the New Testament have gone beyond this limited life, to the ‘New Life’ in Jesus Christ. In other words, they practise the heavenly (world to come) life while they are yet on earth.

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(1) Ibid, p. 36.

(2) St. Augustine: Sermons on the N. T.

This is further supported by the rising of the Lord on the eighth day of the week, or the first day of the new week. Also the children of the Old Testament were circumcised on the eighth day of their birth, and the reward of the eighth beatitude given in the Gospel of St. Matthew (5:10) is receiving the kingdom of heaven.

**2.** The ark of Noah is, in fact, a divine plan, through which God arranged for man's salvation. He personally sealed its door, and preserved it till the end of the flood. Likewise, the church of the New Testament is a divine work whereby we receive church membership through the grace of the Lord. Thus throughout our struggle in the flood, God's hand is preserving us. His Holy Spirit seals our inner doors, so that evil water is no longer capable of sneaking into the ship of our life and upsetting its balance.

**3.** As it was possible only for Noah's ark to be saved from the flood, likewise the Church of God alone has the ability to save men. St. Cyprian says, no salvation can be achieved for anybody outside the church<sup>(1)</sup>.

**4.** St. Augustine<sup>(2)</sup> referred to Noah's ark as a symbol of the church saying:

“Undoubtedly, the ark is a symbol of the city of God on its pilgrimage through history, a figure of the church which was saved by the wood on which there hung the ‘Mediator between God and men, Himself man, Christ Jesus’. (1 Tim. 2: 5).

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Cyprian: Unity of the church.

<sup>(2)</sup> St. Augustine: City of God, book 10, ch 17 (Writings of the Fathers).

Even the very measurements of length, height and breadth of the ark are meant to point to the reality of the human body into which He came as it was foretold that He would come. It would be recalled that the length of a normal body from head to foot is six times the breadth from one side to the other and ten times the thickness from back to front.... That is why the ark was made 300 cubits in length, 50 in breadth and 30 in height.

As for the door in the side that, surely symbolises the open wound made by the lance in the side of the Crucified. It is the door by which those who come to Him enter, in the sense that believers enter the church by means of the sacraments which issued from that wound.

It was ordered that the ark be made out of squared timbers a symbol of the four - square stability of a holy life, which is like a cube stands firm however it is turned.

So it is with every other detail of the ark's construction. They are all symbols to different aspects of the church...".

## **THE SYMBOL OF SHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The theme of the church as a ship or the ship as a symbol of the church, has formed a part of the general church tradition. Christians in every age are aware they are sailing among frightful danger. However, as long as they remain within the Lord's ship, ie. His Church, they are filled with the

hope of reaching the Eternal rest, conquering all powers of darkness by the Cross<sup>(1)</sup> .

Hereunder we give sayings of the Early Fathers about the Church as a ship.

### **SOME SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS**

- + The body of the church as a whole is like a ship carrying men of many different origins through a violent storm. There follows an allegory; in which God the father is the owner of the ship and Christ the captain. The Bishop is like the look-out man. the Presbyters are the crew, the deacons the leading oarsmen and the catechists are the stewards.

#### **PSEUDO - CELEMENT<sup>(2)</sup>**

- + The sea is the world, in which the Church is set, like a ship lost in the deep, but not destroyed, for she has with her the skilful Captain, Christ. And she bears in her midst also victory over death, for she carries with her the Cross of the Lord... Her crew are the two Testaments, and the ropes that stretch around her are the love of Christ which binds the Church; and the net which she bears with her is the laver of regeneration which renews the believers.

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(1) Rahmer: Greek Myths & Christian Mystery.

(2) G. Strecher: Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudo-Klementinen, Berlin 1958.

As a splendid seal, the Spirit from heaven is present, by whom those who believe are sealed.

She also has anchors of iron accompanying her, i.e. the holy commandments of Christ Himself, which are as strong as iron.

She also has mariners on the right and on the left, servants like the holy angels, by whom the Church is always governed and protected.

The ladder in her, leading up to the sail yard is an emblem of the Passion of Christ, which enables the faithful to ascent to the heavens.

And the topsails of the ship represent the prophets, martyrs and apostles, who have entered into their rest....

FR. HIPPOLYTUS<sup>(1)</sup>

- + The sea cannot be crossed unless the sign of victory, which is on the mast, remains unharmed upon the ship.

St. JUSTIN<sup>(2)</sup>

- + We have no difficulty in seeing the sign of the Cross on the ship when it moves across the water with bellying sails.

MINUCIUS FELIX

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(1) De Aticher 29. Quasten: Patrology vol 2, p 213

(2) St. Justin: apology 1:55:3.

- + The ship is a symbol of the Church, which is on the sea of this world and buffeted by the waves of persecution and temptation, while the Lord in His patience seems to sleep, till the last moment, when, awakened by the prayers of the saints, He subdues the world and gives back to His own.

TERTULIAN<sup>(1)</sup>

- + God's Logos will steer your ship and the Holy Spirit will grant you a safe return to heaven's harbour.

ST.CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA<sup>(2)</sup>

- + No one, even in this world of visible things, can traverse the sea and pass over it by his own unaided strength; he needs for that a craft... that is fashioned out of wood and can for this reason alone, pass over the water. Similarly, the soul cannot traverse independent of its own power, the bitter sea of sin and the perilous abyss of the evil power and passions.

PSEUDO MACARIUS<sup>(3)</sup>

- + The sea ruined one man (Adam), while Another came (Jesus) and spreads His shining sails and passed over

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(1) Tertullian: De Baptis. 12:7.

(2) St. Clement of Alexandria, Protrepticus 12:118, 4.

(3) Pseudo Macarius : Hom. Spirit. 44: 16 pg 34: 781 D.

the water and looked down, smiling, at this great grave where the ship was wrecked.

GREGORY NAZIANZUS<sup>(1)</sup>

- + Do not let your ship be painted in pleasant colours. So that it is not as a comely harlot be carried on the strong back of the sea. Rather a good ship should be firmly nailed and sea worthy and soundly fashioned by its builder. Only such a ship can truly make its way through the waves.

GREGORY NAZIANZUS<sup>(2)</sup>

- + (*Advice to the recently ordained bishop*)

When you assemble God's church, be like the captain of a great ship and keep watch that the gatherings are conducted in orderly fashion....

See that the deacons show the brethren to their places, as sailors do with passengers....

See that the church is turned towards the east, as it is proper for a ship; that the doorkeepers stand at the men's entrances to guard the people, and that the deaconesses are at the women's doors as hostesses.

APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) St. Gregory Naz. Pg 37: 574a.

(2) Ibid 37 : 678f.

(3) Apostolic Constitutions 2 : 57.

## CONCLUSION

Now we can understand why the shape of ship has been adopted by our Coptic Church Architecture, and the reason for the recommendations given in the Didascalia to that effect.



## **CHAPTER 7**

# **THE SANCTUARY AND THE ALTAR**

# THE SANCTUARY

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## THE HEAVEN OF HEAVENS

The Sanctuary, as viewed by the Orthodox Church, represents heaven itself or God's residence place among His heavenly creatures and saints. It was defined by Fr. Germanius as the dwelling of Christ, the King of all, sitting on the throne with His Apostles.

Moreover, and more specifically, in the Coptic Church, the sanctuary is related to the Altar to such a degree that the Sanctuary can sometimes be called "Altar". Such a correlation reveals a vital aspect of our faith; namely, the inter - correlation between heaven and the Cross. For since we consider the sanctuary to stand for the heavens, then we can not know this without the Alter ie. without the Cross it is not possible to be acquainted with heaven without the Altar...

This reality was symbolically declared in the Old Testament. Ever since their entry to the promised land the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, which is the symbol of heaven, the Jewish people were committed not to erect, nor offer a sacrifice outside Jerusalem. Offenders were excommunicated from the congregation and consequently lost their heavenly crowns! As if it was the wish of God to emphasise the inseparable nature of the Sanctuary and the Altar, or the heaven and the sacrifice. Through the Altar's sacrifice the

gates of heaven were opened and the cross became part of Eternal Life.

In the light of this understanding, we are bound to realise that our heavenly life cannot be isolated from crucifixion with Christ, and our joyful hope is coupled with our spiritual struggle, the association of the sanctuary with the Alter, and the heavens with the Cross are an analogy!

## **INSIDE THE SANCTUARY**

Behind the Altar lies the “TRIBUNE” on which the bishop sits and occupies his “THRONE” (cathedral), and around him the priests practise their worship and preaching. For this reason the Sanctuary is also referred to by some as “presbyterum”, ie. the place reserved for presbyters<sup>(1)</sup>.

On the top of the tribune lies the NICHE which represents God’s bosom embracing to the whole world through the Altar and the priestly ministry.

## **SANCTITY OF THE SANCTUARY**

The above brief summary uncovers the spiritual beauty and sanctity of the Sanctuary, in connection with which the following traditions are observed by the church to indicate its reverence :

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<sup>(1)</sup> Davies: The Origin & Development of Early Christian church Architecture p. 36. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian church, p. 123.

**1.** Laymen are forbidden to take part in the Communion inside the Sanctuary area, and sometimes they were not permitted to enter it at all. This was perhaps necessary to avoid one of the pagan habits of taking an oath while touching the Altar, which was referred to by St. John Chrysostom<sup>(1)</sup>. At other times the church sufficed by only forbidding the pagans from entering the Sanctuary and touching the Altar, as was mentioned by St. Gregory of Nyssa<sup>(2)</sup>.

**2.** Till this present day, we can only step into the Sanctuary bare-footed, in response to the divine commandment to Moses “Take off your shoes... for the place whereon you stand is holy ground”. (Ex 3:5).

Taking off the shoes indicates the feeling of unworthiness to be present in such a holy place in which the fearful sacrifice is offered; the sacrifice which the angels long to see.<sup>(3)</sup>

Moreover according to Origen, taking off the shoes bears a few other fascinating points:

**a.** In the past, shoes were made of the leather of dead animals. Subsequently, in observing this commandment of God, we put aside our earthly attachments to dead things, and look up to the immortal and heavenly things as we prepare to meet Him.

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Chrysostom hom. in Acts 9:6 PG. 60:48.

<sup>(2)</sup> PG. 46:581

<sup>(3)</sup> St. Basil Liturgy - Prayer before the Holy Eucharist

- b.** Drums were also made of the same leather, and were discarded here which stresses that in order to meet with the holiness of the Lord, the soul must put aside all vainglory, and stick to her hidden spiritual struggle.
  
- c.** It has been a standard practise in the Old Testament that if a man refused to marry his brother's widow in order to raise up children for his dead brother, according to God's commandment, the widow would pull out the shoe from his feet, in the presence of the elders, and the man's house would be surnamed "House of the Unshoed". (Deut. 25:5 - 10).

Thus, in taking off his shoes, Moses symbolically declared that he was not the church's bridegroom.... Likewise, every time a bishop, a priest or a deacon takes off his shoes upon entering the Sanctuary area, he admits to himself that he is not the bridegroom, but a friend and a servant to the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

- 3.** The church ordains that: "No talking is allowed in the Sanctuary, except for urgent matters".

ST. BASIL

## THE INNER ALTAR

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In order to discuss the physical Altar that is located in the Sanctuary, we ought to point out to another type of Altar situated in our inner hearts, not alien to it but really in conjunction with it.

The intimate connection between these two Altars becomes evident as believers receive the mystery of God's Altar ie. the Eucharist. For every time they take communion, they participate by offering sacrifices of love, repentance, prayers, fasting, alms etc... through the merits of the Blood of Christ. Thus they share in the mystery of the visible Altar through their own mystical and hidden Altars. As a result, we say that our personal altars do not gather around the Altar, but rather form living stones in the Lord's Altar.

It may well be that because of this spiritual notion, coupled with the fact that Christian Altars of the first two centuries were never as sophisticated nor as large as the Jewish or pagan stone Altars intended for bloody sacrifice, that non-Christians were led to the belief that our worship rejected Altars. This appears from Origen's reply criticising against Clesus. He says "He (Clesus) does not perceive that the soul of every good man among us is an Altar, from which arises incense which is truly and spiritually sweet-smelling, namely the prayers ascending from a pure conscience. St. John in Revelation says, in that context, that "the odours are the prayers of saints" (5:8), and the Psalmist says, "let my prayers come up before You as incense" 141:2.

There is no doubt that the true statues and gifts which are fit offerings to God are not made by craftsmen. No, they are carved in our souls and fashioned by the Divine Logos (Word), they are virtues by which we imitate “the First-born of all creation”, (Col. 1: 15), who is a model of all virtues in Himself; patterns of justice, prudence, fortitude, piety and all other virtues...

All Christians, in short, strive to build Altars and statues of these kinds, which are not devoid of life and feeling but are capable of receiving God’s Spirit...<sup>(1)</sup>

St. Augustine describes the inner Altar as being our ‘Faith’ by saying<sup>(2)</sup>, “In the spiritual sense, therefore, we may understand faith as an Altar in the inner temple of God, of which the visible Altar is a symbol. Whatever gift we offer to God - being prophecy, or doctrine, or prayer, or hymn, or psalm, or whatever other spiritual gifts of this kind that may come to mind - cannot be acceptable to God unless it is reinforced by sincere faith and be firmly and immutably fixed on it, so that our words may be pure and undefiled”.

According to St. Clement of Alexandria, members of the congregation form the inner Altar of the Lord when they assemble for prayers in one spirit and one mind. He says<sup>(3)</sup> : “The Altar, then that is among us here, the terrestrial one, is the congregation of those who devote themselves to prayers, having as it were one common voice and mind...”.

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(1) Origen against Celsus 8:17,18.

(2) Augustine: Sermon on the Mount 10:72

(3) St. Clement of Alex.: Miscellanies, book 7.

Durandus, the Western bishop of the thirteenth century, also talks about the inner Altar, saying<sup>(1)</sup>, “The Altar is our mortification in our heart, in which carnal motions are consumed by the fervour of the Holy Spirit.... Or by the Altar we understand the soul of every man, which is built by the Lord of various living stones, which are the varied and different virtues”.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Durandus: Symbolism of Churches and church Ornaments London 1906, p 31, 36.

# THE ALTAR IN THE NEW AND OLD TESTAMENT

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## NOMENCLATURE

The English word ‘Altar’ is derived from the Latin word ‘Altare’, equivalent to a Greek word , which means the place or the sculpture upon which sacrifices are slain.

In general, this term was most commonly adopted among Latin Fathers, like Tertullian<sup>(1)</sup>, St. Cyprian<sup>(2)</sup>, St. Augustine<sup>(3)</sup>, and St. Ambrose<sup>(4)</sup>. However, they occasionally used the word ‘mensa’ to refer to the same thing, although it was more specifically applied to the slab, on which the holy Elements were placed.

As for the Latin word ‘Ara’, it was mainly used in conjunction with pagan altars and has never been recorded in the writings of Early Fathers to refer to the Christian Altar except for Tertullian who used the phrase ‘Ara dei’<sup>(5)</sup>, i.e., God’s Altar. Nevertheless, it was occasionally inscribed on graves.

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(1) Tertullian: Exhort. Constit., ch 10.

(2) St. Cyprian: Ep. 64 (65).

(3) St. Augustine: Serm. 159;1.

(4) St. Ambrose: De Virigin, ch 18.

(5) Tertullian: De Orati 14 (19).

Prudentius, however, used the word ‘Ara’ to designate the base of the Altar, and he was followed by others.

In the Greek language, on the other hand, three terms were introduced:

1. ‘trapeza kuriou’, i.e. ‘table’, a term which was frequently employed by some Eastern Fathers and in Eastern liturgical texts. Sometimes it is used singly<sup>(1)</sup> and at other times as i.e., the Table of the Lord<sup>(2)</sup>. But very often adjectives are added: such as ‘tgia trapeza’ i.e. ‘The Holy Table’ or ‘Mystical and tremendous Table’ the preferred term to St. John Chrysostom.

2. quoiastpriou, the ordinary equivalent of ‘Mazbah’ in Arabic, Pnaerswosi in Coptic, ‘×kzm’ in Hebrew and ‘Khoran’ in Armenian. This generally is the most popular term to the Eastern Fathers, as recorded in the writings of:

\* St. Ignatius<sup>(3)</sup> when he said “Be zealous to come together all of you, as to one temple, of God, as one Altar, to Jesus Christ”.

\* It was used by St. Irenaeus<sup>(4)</sup> when he said that the sacrifice of Eucharist should be offered on the Altar, and

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(1) St. Chrysostom: hom. 3 in Ep. de Eph.

(2) 1 Cor. 10:21. Origen: c. Clesus 8:24.

(3) St. Ignatius, to Magnesians 7:2.

(4) St. Irenaeus haer 4:18:6.

\* Eusebius<sup>(1)</sup> when he talked about the Altar of the Basilica at Tyre that was dedicated in 314 AD, and the other Altars that were erected throughout the world, following the peace that pervaded the Church at that time.

3. Bwmdv Equivalent to ‘Ara’ above, was more often used in the Holy Bible with reference to heathen altars, as given in (1 Mac. 1: 59, Acts 17: 23). For this reason the Eastern Fathers avoided its use. Nevertheless St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen adopted it in a figurative sense when they stated that the soul of the believer is the Christian Altar<sup>(2)</sup> .



## **THE NEED FOR ALTARS**

It may be logical for somebody to raise the question:

Why do we need an Altar now, since all animal sacrifices have been substituted by the ultimate and unique Sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross?

The answer to this question is readily extracted both the Old and New Testaments:

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<sup>(1)</sup> Eusebius H.E 10:444.

<sup>(2)</sup> St. Clem. Alex., Strom. 7:31,32. Origen: Celsus 8:17.

**1.** Prophecies of the Old Testament clearly pointed out to the future establishment of the Altar of the New Testament, which is not solely related to Jerusalem, nor confined to a certain nation. For example:

**a.** The words of Malachi the Prophet assure “From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the sun, my Name shall be great among the Gentiles, and in every place incense shall be offered unto my Name, and a pure offering...” (1: 10,11).

Surely, that would not apply to incense and oblation offerings as practised in the Old Testament, since there were only permitted in Jerusalem, and conducted by Hebrew priest alone.

**b.** To the same effect, but more specifically about the Lord’s Altar in Egypt, Isaiah the Prophet foretold: “In that day shall there be an Altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt... The Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation! (Is. 19: 19-22).

**2.** The Lord Himself spoke about the Altar in the New Testament when He stated: “If you offer your oblations on the Altar...” (Mt. 5: 23).

**3.** In a comparison between the Christian worship and that of the pagans, the apostle Paul warned, ‘You cannot be partaker of the Lord’s table and of the table of devils’ (1 Cor. 10: 21).

Undoubtedly, referring to the pagan's altar as the 'table of devils' can only suggest that 'the Lord's table' is the Christian Altar.

## **THE ALTAR & THE SACRIFICIAL ACT**

The Christian Altar has been subject to attempts which aim to deprive it from the sacrificial act. They furnish their reasoning on the ground that early Christian Altars were made of timber, and were generally known as 'Tables', as if the Christian Altar was just an ordinary table and no real sacrifice was involved.

We have already verified the sacrificial act in our Christian worship, bearing in mind that the Sacrifice of Eucharist is but a spiritual and bloodless ones<sup>(1)</sup>. Now we wish to establish the following points:

**1.** The sacrificial act was known to the church ever since the apostolic age, as the Apostle says: "We have an Altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat". (Heb. 13: 10).

**2** The writer of the Didache<sup>(2)</sup>, about 100 AD, refers to the Eucharist as a pure sacrifice, a reality which was

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(1) Fr. Malaty: Christ in the Eucharist, p 49-61.

(2) Didache, ch. 14.

confirmed by Early Church Father<sup>(1)</sup>, like SS. Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyprian, Augustine etc....

3. The Early Church has applied the Greek terms;  
thusia = sacrifice; and  
prophoro = oblation,  
in conjunction with the Eucharist.

In addition, St. Ignatius called the Eucharistic assembly of the church ‘thusiasterion’, i.e. ‘the place of the sacrifice’<sup>(2)</sup> while St. Clement of Rome<sup>(3)</sup> recognised the bishop’s task as to offer the ‘prospheteris’ or ‘the oblation’.

4. The Fathers have defined the word ‘trapeza ( Table ) as an Altar<sup>(4)</sup> .

5. Calling the Altar ‘Holy Table’ does not remove the sacrificial act from it, but in fact adds further depth to it.

Back in the Old Testament, animals were led by people to the Altar to be slaughtered unwillingly, and in the absence of emotions! While on our Altar, the Victim is present willingly, motivated by His tremendous love to grant us life. Not only is He the Victim, but He is also the Hidden Priest, and Mediator

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(1) St. Ignatius, Ep. to Phil. 4. - St. Justin, Ep. to Trypho 117. - St. Irenaeus, AD Heraes. 4:17:5; 4:18:6. - St. Cyril of Jerusalem 5:8. - St. Augustine, Ep. 68:9.

(2) St. Ignatius, Ep. to Eph. 5:2, to Trall. 7:2, to Phil. 4.

(3) I Clem. 44.

(4) Pseudo-Athanasius Dispt. Cont. Arian 17. Tert., De Exhort. Constit., ch 10.

between His heavenly Father and people through His Sacrificial deed. To this Table the Church is invited not to behold a dead sacrifice, but rather to attain unity with the Victim, the Life-giver... She takes up her position upon the Altar, being the True Body of Christ! To that meaning, the apostle Paul says, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”. (1 Cor. 10:17).

St. Augustine also says<sup>(1)</sup> :

“It is the universal sacrifice, offered to God by the High Priest, Who offered Himself in suffering for us, in order to make of us the body of such a great Head.... This, then, is the Sacrifice of the Christians that all of them may be a single body in Jesus Christ.

This is the mystery that the Church celebrates in this sacrament of the Altar. Wherein it is shown to her that in this thing which she offers, she herself is offered to God”.

“There you are upon the Table, there you are in the Chalice!”

“He has instituted on His Altar the sacrament of our peace and unity”.

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Augustine, City of God 10:6,23. - Sermon 829 to the Newly-baptised. - Sermon 2-2 to the Newly-baptised.

## **THE ALTAR IN THE NEW AND OLD TESTAMENTS**

In order to visualise the connection between the Altar of the New Testament and those of the Old Testament, we wish to draw attention that the Altar of burnt-offering, The Altar of incense, Table of shewbread and the Ark of Covenant, no longer exist in the church of the New Testament. They all have been replaced by the New Altar, which in fact fulfils their mysteries and performs their message, but on a spiritual and heavenly level.

We shall discuss below the various forms of the Old Testament Church furniture in the light of the New Testament Altar.

### **1. THE ALTAR OF BURNT-OFFERING, OR THE BRONZE ALTAR**

This was an essential item in the House of God, for the dwelling of God among His people is based on the sacrifice, through which reconciliation takes place.

God Himself lit its fire in a marvellous way (Lev.9: 24), and demanded that its flames should be left permanently on. Sacrifices must be offered on it continuously so that their blood is poured upon the flames, causing an unceasing flow of smoke to heavens. (Lev. 6: 9).

Such a practice is only a symbol of the infinite love, lit upon the New Altar through the Cross. It remains un-

extinguished to bring the human race unto the Hollis of the Lord.

It is also a sign of our love towards God, offered continuously through the bloodless Sacrifice, a love which the waters of sin cannot extinguish, or as Solomon says “Love no flood can quench”. (Song 8:7).

We should keep in our minds, however, that in locating the Altar of burnt-offering outside the Holy of Hollis is a striking declaration that animal sacrifices are unable to bring man into heaven. On the other hand, situating the New Altar in the middle of the Sanctuary; ie., the Holy of Holies is an evidence of having access to heaven itself through the slain, Jesus Christ.

## **2. THE ALTAR OF INCENSE, OR THE GOLDEN ALTER.**

On this golden plated Altar which is surrounded with a golden crown, fragrant incense is burned every morning and evening (Exod. 30: 8). Priests alone can offer it, but only in the house of God. (2 Chron. 26: 16- 21).

The incense refers to prayer (Ps. 141:2; Luke 1: 10), since we have gained the right to pray through the golden Christian Altar, namely the imperial Altar that belongs to Christ, our King!

### **3. THE TABLE OF SHEWBREAD (Exod. 25: 30)**

Every Saturday, twelve loaves of bread of Presence are placed on this Table, to indicate God's Providence towards all His people. He feeds them with the heavenly bread, the Life-giving Body of Christ.

### **4. THE ARK OF THE COVENANT (Exod. 25: 10)**

It is the only item that is housed in the Holy of Holies, for it represents God's Presence, or His dwelling among His people.

Examining the Ark closely, we find that its contents and details are fulfilled in the Christian Altar. The following examples will clarify this:

**A.** It was made of timber (acacia), as a symbol of the wooden Cross, the mystery of our union with God and the key of His Holies.

**B.** Both its interior and exterior were covered with sheets of pure gold, a sign of the internal and external purity that we have gained in the merits of the Sacrifice !

**C.** A crown of gold encircled it, which refers to our sharing in the heavenly glories.

**D.** Its cover was shadowed by two Cherubims which points to our unity with heavenly creatures and our participation in the Seraphim and Cherubim hymns and liturgies through the sacrifice.

**E.** Between the two Cherubims, clouds appeared and there God dwelled (Lev. 16: 2, Num. 7: 89), and His voice was heard.... An indication of the eschatology of our liturgy in the New Altar, ie., the eternal character.

**F.** Inside the Ark there were :

**I.** The golden pot containing the Manna, symbol of the true Manna, the Body of Christ.

**II.** Aaron's rod, is an evidence that the authority which is given to the church for preaching and worshipping (rod of pastorate) is part of the New Altar.

**III.** The Tables of Covenant, written by God's finger (Exod. 25: 16, 21; Heb. 9: 3, 4), signify that the Gospel of our salvation, the New Covenant, has been realised through the New Altar .

## **THE ALTAR MATERIAL**

### **1. WOODEN ALTARS**

During the first four centuries, Altars were generally made of wood, perhaps due to either or all of the following :

**A.** Christ Himself celebrated the Last Super on a wooden Table.

**B.** The Cross upon which the Body of Christ was hung was made of timber, and so is the Tree of Life that brings forth heavenly fruit.

**C.** It can easily be moved from one place to another during periods of persecution.

Examples of early wooden Altars are:

**I.** Certain relics of a wooden Altar are still preserved in the Basilica Lateran at Rome, and fragments of another timber Altar are kept in the church of St. Pudentiana, on which St. Peter was said to have celebrated the Liturgy.

**II.** Optatus of Mileve<sup>(1)</sup> reproved the work of Donatists for destroying Altars of the Catholic Churches and using them as firewood.

**III.** St. Augustine<sup>(2)</sup> recorded that the Orthodox bishop Maximianus was almost beaten to death by timber boards of the Altar, under which he had taken refuge. In another text he stated that Altars of his time were movable so they certainly were wooden.

**D.** In talking about a certain Altar that was destroyed in Alexandria by Heraclius, St. Athanasius specifically

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<sup>(1)</sup> Optatus, De Schism. Danatist. 6:1.

<sup>(2)</sup> St. Augustine, Ep. 185,27; 195:1.

said<sup>(1)</sup>, “It was of wood”, which would imply that other types of Altars made of other materials also existed.

We can deduce then, that early Altars were often wooden, but other materials were also introduced.

It is noteworthy that the Coptic Church has never been very strict with regard to Altar materials. Surely wooden Altars were over ruled since the fourth century, but that was purely for practical reasons. Timber Altars are still used in temporary church buildings in Egypt, till the final construction where stone, marble or brick Altars are erected. The majority of the Altars in our churches in America and Australia are wooden, once again for practical feasibility.

Wooden Altars continue in use in the Ethiopian Church at the present time<sup>(2)</sup>.

Some other churches, however, went to the extreme, by actually forbidding the use of wooden Altars. We list some cases :

**I.** The local council of Albon (Epiona) in France, 517 AD forbade hallowing Altars, other than stone - made ones, with chrism<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) St. Athanasius, AD. Monach.

(2) A. A. King Rites of Eastern Christian Altar, vol. 1, p. 553,4.  
C.E. Pocknee, The Christian Altar, 1963, p. 37.

(3) Council of Epaona, Canon 26.

**II.** Towards the end of the ninth century, the Nestorians ceased to use wooden Altars, instructed by their Patriarch John bar - Algari<sup>(1)</sup>.

**III.** It is related that old timber Altars in England were destroyed by an order issued by Bishop Wulstan of Worcester (1062- 1095 AD).

## **2. STONE ALTARS**

“It is certain that from a very early date stone Altars were in use, and it is almost certain that there is a very close connection between them and the tombs of martyrs. It would seem that probably during the same period at which the Eucharist was celebrated on wooden tables..., in the houses which served in early times for the purposes of Christian worship, it was also celebrated on the stone slabs (mensae) which covered the relics of martyrs and formed part of their tombs”.

This connection was brought into light in response to the vision of St. John, “I saw under the Altar, the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (Rev. 6: 9). Surely, erecting Altars over martyrs’ stone graves is a declaration of the mutual love between God and His church, for the Altar - in its mystical reality - is the Tomb that contains the Sacrificial Body of Christ; witnessing God’s love towards the whole world in general and the Church in particular. Thus if He died for His Church, then

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<sup>(1)</sup> Assemani, *Biblioth. Orient* 3, p.238.

it is her goal to die for her belief in Him and reciprocate His love, through her martyrs!

To that effect, St. Ambrose says<sup>(1)</sup>, “Let the triumphant victims come to the place where Christ is the Sacrifice!

He is upon the Altar, who suffered for all, they are beneath it who are redeemed by His Passion”!

According to Origen, there exists a close correlation between the suffering of martyrs and the Cross, or their sacrifices of love and Christ’s love. In every martyr, he sees Christ Himself is suffering. He says,<sup>(2)</sup> “As we behold the martyrs coming forth from every church to be brought before the tribunal, we see in each the Lord Himself condemned”.

St. Cyprian<sup>(3)</sup> confirmed this during the persecution times when he comforted and strengthened Christians facing martyrdom. He assured them that “the Lord Himself contends in us, goes to the battle with us, and in our hard struggle, He personally gives the crown and receives it”.

Eusebius, also recorded that during the martyrdom of Blandina the confessors saw in their sister, the Lord Christ who died for them<sup>(4)</sup>. The Acts of martyrs are full of evidences showing how the Early Church witnessed the presence of Christ in the amphitheater, bearing the suffering of martyrs.

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Ambrose, Ep. 22:13, PL. 16:1023.

<sup>(2)</sup> Origen, in Jerm. Hom. 14:7, PG. 13:411.

<sup>(3)</sup> St. Cyprian, Ep. 10:4; 37:2; 76:7.

<sup>(4)</sup> Euseb. H.E. 5:1:41.

No wonder then, that their relics have been sanctified, and even their clothes stained with blood and the earth under them, deserve honouring. For this reason, Altars were founded over their relics or upon the ground that witnessed their martyrdom.

We shall mention some documents that testify to this practice in the following lines:

**A.** It is given in the ‘Apostolic Constitutions’<sup>(1)</sup> that believers were requested to assemble in cemeteries in order to read the Scriptures and recite the psalms, in commemoration of martyrs, saints and all the departed Christians as well as for conducting the Eucharist in Churches and cemeteries.

**B.** The same custom was mentioned in the Epistle of the Smyrneans<sup>(2)</sup>, relative to the martyrdom of St. Polycarp as early as 155 AD. It says that after they had placed relics of the martyr in an adequate spot, they prayed that they might be able to gather again in that place to celebrate his anniversary.

**C.** St. Augustine also talked about the Altar that was built on the site of St. Cyprian the martyr<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition, monumental evidence supports this tradition, as occurs in the “Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics”<sup>(4)</sup>. It is certain that not all the tombs now existing were

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(1) Apost. Const. 4:17

(2) Martyr Polycarp. ch 18.

(3) St. Augustine, Sermon 310:2.

(4) Hastings p. 339.

used for the celebration of Eucharist, but it is agreed by all that many were used for this purpose; and instances occur of the slab covering the tomb being provided with rings, which would enable it to be drawn out for the purpose of the Eucharist.

Stone Altars bear one other mystical meaning in that they represent Christ the Rock and Cornerstone (1 Cor 10: 4, Eph. 2: 20, 1 Pet. 2: 4).

At any rate, when the peace of the Church was established, many exclusive church buildings were built all over the world and stone Altars became widely adopted ever since. Churches were erected either on martyrdom sites of famous saints or the relics of such martyrs were transferred to the various churches.

### **3. METALLIC ALTARS**

When Christianity was declared as the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became natural that more expensive materials were used for making Altars. The following are some of the famous Altars.

**A.** The Altar presented to the church of St. Peter by Emperor Constantine which was made of silver, inlaid with gold, decorated with green and white jewels and jacinths on all sides. The number of jewels reached 400 and weighed 35 lbs<sup>(1)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> Savies: Origen & Depelop..... p. 209.

**B.** The Altar presented to the church which was erected on the site where the Cross had been concealed for three centuries, by St. Helen. It was made of gold, ornamented with precious stones.

**C.** Sozomen<sup>(1)</sup> refers to the Altar of gold presented to the church of Agia Sophia at Constantinople by Pulcheria, daughter of Arcadius, in the first half of the fifth century.

**D.** We have very full account of the magnificent Altar presented by Justinian to the new basilica of Agia Sophia, constructed by him between the years 532 and 564. We are indebted for this description to Paul the Silentiary, who says that the Holy Table was of gold, adorned with precious stones, resting upon pillars of gold, and that it was surmounted by a dome or ciborium, supported by pillars of silver gilt, and terminated in a great cross of gold<sup>(2)</sup> .

**E.** In the West, it is worthwhile mentioning the Altar of St. Ambrose at Milan which was probably erected before the year 835 AD Its front is of gold, the back and sides of silver, and it is decorated with panels containing subjects in relief and with enamel work. It is probably the most elaborate specimen of its kind which has survived<sup>(3)</sup> .



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(1) Sozomen H.E. 9:1.

(2) Paul Silentiary: Descrip. St.Sophioe, AD.Bona 55:632

(3) Hastining,340

# **THE COPTIC ALTAR**

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

1. The Coptic Altar takes the shape of approximately a cube, which resembles the Tomb of the Lord. In that, it varies considerably from western Altars, which till recently consisted of a board set upon one pillar, and sometimes four or five pillars.

2. It is invariably detached from the wall and stands clear in the middle of the Sanctuary, a practice that has been copied from the Heavenly Altar as mentioned in the Book of Revelation. St. John says, "I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden Altar which is before God". ( Rev. 9:13).

During the service, the presbyter walks around it, offering incense and secretly praying the litanies of Peace, the Fathers and Gatherings, as if he asks for the Church, her ministers and congregation before the Divine Throne, or as if the Divine Throne descends among the assembled church to receive her persistent supplications about the fulfilment of her message, namely bringing the entire world unto Him.

In contrast, Western Altars are often placed directly adjacent to the eastern wall; a tradition that came into light towards the second part of middle centuries<sup>(1)</sup> .

3. Often it is made of stone, marble or brick, but exceptions exist. For example, in the new Cathedral of St. Mark in Cairo, a bronze Altar is in use, which was presented to our church by the Russian church. Other wooden Altars appear overseas and in some temporary Alters in churches within Egypt.

4. It must be hollow so that relics of saints can be kept inside or beneath it. Nevertheless, recent trends tend to keep these relics in a container next to the icon of the saint to enable the people to kiss it and receive their blessing.

On the eastern side next to the Altar there exists a small opening showing an interior recess or cavity, which was used during persecution to hide the Holy Gifts when necessary.<sup>(1)</sup>

5. In the Coptic Church, the choir is usually raised three steps above the rest of the Nave, while the sanctuary is often raised one step above the choir. Yet the Altar is never raised above the sanctuary, but is fitted directly on its ground, as directed by the divine commandment. (Exod. 20 : 26).

Exceptions to this were found in the desert churches, where the Altar is constructed on a step or a platform above the floor of the Sanctuary<sup>(2)</sup> .

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<sup>(1)</sup> Davies: Dict. of Liturgy & Worship (Altar).

<sup>(2)</sup> Butler, Ancient Churches of Egypt, vol 2, p2

The philosophy behind this rule seems to be that the gates of heaven are opened before the presbyter upon his entry to the sanctuary. Hence there is no need to ascend on a platform to offer the Sacrifice lest he should fall into vainglory, counting himself above his spiritual brothers and children.

**6.** It is known that Coptic Altars are bare of any form of engravings, even shapes of the cross, following the divine commandment that the use of tools in the formation of the Altar will pollute it. (Exod 20 : 25). All relevant ornaments appear at the Canopy that surmounts the Altar.<sup>(1)</sup>

## **MULTIPLE ALTARS**

Since the dawn of Christianity, the church stood behind the principle of allotting one altar for every church, the emphasis being that every city included one Christian community shepherded by one bishop, assisted by a number of priests and deacons. Liturgies could only be celebrated by the bishop, and since a bishop could not conduct two liturgies in a single day, only one Altar sufficed.

The words of St. Ignatius support this,<sup>(1)</sup> “Be careful to use one Eucharist, for there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Ignatius: Ep. To Phil. 4:1.

Christ and one cup of union with His Blood, one Altar, as there is one bishop”.

Due to the phenomenal growth in the Christian population, priests were given the authority to celebrate the Eucharist, and deviation from the above principle became inevitable. Multiple Altars began to appear, and according to the popular work entitled ‘Miracles of the Virgin’, the great church of Atrib, near Banha, contained twenty four Altars.

Another factor that helped the introduction of multiple Altars is that the church tradition forbids engaging an Altar in more than one celebration, in the course of a single day. The Copts treat the Altar in a similar fashion to that of the communicant; namely he must be ‘fasting’ as we phrase it. The same applies to service vestments and the sacred vessels in the celebration.

S. Clarke wrote about multiple Altars in the Coptic Church saying:<sup>(1)</sup> “The number of Altars varies: some churches have but one, others a considerable number. Three seems a favourite number; this reference is said by some to be in honour of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity; by others the three altars are said to correspond to the Altar of Incense, the Altar of Sacrifice and the Table of the Ark in the Jewish Tabernacle”.

In this context we wish to stress that despite having multiple Altars in our church, we theologically believe in One Altar, the One Tomb that contains the One Body of Christ. In that respect it does not vary from our relief in the One Church,

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Clarke: Christian antiquities in the Nile Valley, 1912, p.110

despite the numerous church buildings, and the One Sacrifice that is offered at more than one place at the same time.

Here we bring forth the words of St. John Chrysostom with regard to the One Sacrifice that is offered on various Altars:

“Do we not daily offer the Sacrifice ?!

We offer it... And this is unique, not multiple.

It was offered once, and He entered the Holy of Holies.

It is the same Sacrifice that we offer,  
not one today and another tomorrow.

One Christ everywhere, as a whole everywhere, only  
One Body.

As everywhere there is One Body, so everywhere there  
is One Sacrifice”.

## **CONSECRATION OF ALTARS**

In the first three centuries, the Altar was consecrated by any of the following:

1. Just by celebrating the Liturgy on it.
2. Placing relics of martyrs beneath it.
3. A bishop anoints it by Chrism.

At present, in the Coptic Church, the Liturgy of the Eucharist can be temporarily held on an unconsecrated Altar as long as a consecrated Altar-Board is placed upon it.

The consecration of the Altar by Chrism is normally done as a part of dedicating the whole Church. It involves a

long service which commences at sunset and concludes by the Liturgy of the Eucharist on the following morning. The service is conducted by a bishop...

## **ALTAR COVERING**

According to Fr. Theodore of Mesopotamia<sup>(1)</sup>, the Altar coverings represents the linen cloth of the Lord's burial.

In fact they have practical implications, in that they serve in absorbing the Holy Element in the Chalice if accidentally spilled, and hence avoid dropping it on the floor. Later they are either washed or burned and their ashes are thrown in the baptistery or in a stream of running water.

The Church gives a special interest to Altar clothing and individuals compete in covering Altar with expensive materials decorated with golden crosses and pictures of angels. However, exaggeration in this field is not recommended, as quoted by St. John Chrysostom.<sup>(2)</sup>

According to the Coptic rite, an Altar must not be left without coverings, which often consist of three layers :

**I.** The first cloth covers the Altar completely from all sides, and is decorated with four crosses - one at each corner - or just a big cross in the centre.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Danielou: The Bible & the Liturgy.

<sup>(2)</sup> St. John Chrysostom: In Mt. Hom. 50:4. PG.58:509

**II.** A white linen cover is placed on the above, which hangs only about 15 cm. from the Altar surface.

**III.** The third layer is used only during the celebration of the Liturgy of Eucharist to cover the Holy Gifts, and is called 'Prospharine' derived from the Greek word 'prospora', ie., 'oblation'. It represents the stone that the angel rolled away from the Tomb of Christ. After the prayer of Reconciliation, the priest and the deacon lift it up from its place and shake it so that the little jinglets attached to its edges produce audible sounds. It resembles the earthquake that took place during the resurrection of Christ.<sup>(1)</sup>

The most commonly employed material, in the Coptic rite, is the white linen as an indication of purity, but in recent times red cotton velvet is sometimes used for the first covering.

In the fourth century, Optatus spoke of linen clothing as being very common in his days, and the Roman Pope Silvester was said to have made it a law to use linen in this application. Mention, however, is made by Paul Silentarius of purple Altar clothes.<sup>(2)</sup>

During persecution periods it is said that priests would tear Altar coverings and quench the candles before leaving the church, so that non-Christians could not get to use them for any purpose.

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(1) Fr. Malaty: Christ in the Eucharist.

(2) Hallett: A Catholic Dict. P 21.

## STRIPPING OF ALTARS

There is no special ceremony associated with stripping (uncovering) of Altars in the Coptic Church as compared with the Catholic Church. In the latter, the custom involves removing Altar clothing during the recitation of Psalm 21 (22), towards the end of the Liturgy on Maundy Thursday. However, in their 1970 revision of the Liturgy of the Holy Week, the tendency was to return to the early tradition which included no ceremony,<sup>(1)</sup> although removal of the covers still takes place on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

The Catholic Church has presented some symbolic meanings for this rite, such as :

**I.** Since the Altar refers to Christ Himself, consequently its coverings refer to His members i.e., the Church. Thus carrying out this rite symbolises the separation of Christ from His members prior to crucifixion.

**II.** It reminds the people that the Lord was stripped of His glory at the time of His Passion, and also to stripping off His garments before the Crucifixion<sup>(2)</sup>. For this reason, in the ninth century, Altars were stripped during the recitation of the words, 'they divided My vesture among...'<sup>(3)</sup>

**III.** To Durandus (13th century), this rite is connected with Isaiah 53 and of the rending of the Temple veil.

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(1) Davies. Dict. of Liturgy & Worship. p.8

(2) Hllett. A Catholic Dict., p 403.

(3) Ordo Ramanus. 31

**IV.** Because this rite is accompanied with washing the Altar, indication is given to the mourning of the Church for the death of her Lord.

Lastly, we ought to mention that in the early church, Altar covers were taken off after the service of the Eucharistic liturgy till the next celebration. Altars were left bare during the week, but that did not bear any symbolic significance.

## **WASHING ALTARS**

Once again, the tradition of washing the altar was never known in the Coptic Church. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, practised it mainly in the Middle Ages; in Rome, Spain, France, England etc., on Maundy Thursday. A similar custom also prevails among the Dominicans, Carmelites and in some churches in France and Germany.<sup>(1)</sup>

Apparently this rite evolved originally as a part of cleaning the whole church building in preparation for the Easter festival. But now it could bear the following :

**I.** It refers to washing the Disciples' feet by the Lord on Maundy Thursday, ie., the Church is cleaned from her sins by the Lord's Hand.

**II.** Washing with wine and water is an indication that our salvation is accomplished by the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Davies. Dict. of Lit. & Worship., p.8. (b) Hallett: A Catholic Dict.

## SANCTITY OF ALTARS

A point of extreme interest is that the Altar has held a distinct sanctity ever since the Early Church. Nothing is placed on it, apart from the Holy Elements, the sacred vessels and the Gospel. Even the relics of saints and martyrs are not placed on it.

Gregory Dix says<sup>(1)</sup>, The standing of any object whatever, on the Altar, was entirely contrary to the devotional conventions of the Early Church.

Lamps and candelabra were hung above it, and standard candlesticks were placed around... But the Altar itself remained bare of such ornaments for almost the first thousand year of Christian history in the West, and perhaps to an even later date in the East.

David J.G. also says,<sup>(2)</sup> “The placing of candlesticks and a cross on the Altar also is an innovation in the West, the candlesticks and cross originally were used in processions and placed on the floor around the Altar”.

The reasoning for adding the cross to the above items, according to the ‘Dictionary of the Catholic church’ by Harvard is that,<sup>(3)</sup> “By the 13th century, at least, the cross had been transferred in some churches from the ciborium and placed upon the Altar itself, but it was only by slow degrees that this arrangement became widespread. This placing of the cross

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<sup>(1)</sup> Dix: The Shape of the Liturgy, Ch.12.

<sup>(2)</sup> Davies: Dict., of Lit. & Worship, p 6.

See Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church . p. 40.

<sup>(3)</sup> p. 264.

upon the Altar appears as a result of the disuse of the ciborium....”.

In our Coptic churches, the Cross is not placed on the altar, for the altar itself is the Lord’s Golgotha or the Lord’s Cross. The majority of the chief Coptic Altars are provided with Ciboriums (Canopies) surmounted with Crosses.

Likewise, flowers are not allowed on the Altar, because it is beautified by the Lord Himself, who reflects His spiritual beauty on His believers’ souls.

As for candlesticks, one is placed on the right side of the Altar, and the other on the opposite side. They refer to the two angels guarding the Lord’s Tomb. At present, placing candlesticks on the Altar is not at all uncommon, but the trend is to return to the early practices. For example, this is observed in our church in Melbourne, and only the Holy Gifts and sacred vessels are put on the Altar.

Lastly, we wish to draw attention to an old tradition; namely placing the Holy Gospel on the Altar till the reading time. E. Bishop interpreted this by saying,<sup>(1)</sup> “... It is to be remembered that the Gospel Book was regarded as representing our Lord Himself; just as the Altar came to be conceived as the Throne of the Great King”. A second relevant explanation is also given by Jungmann, that it bears the declaration of receiving the word of the Gospel directly from the Divine Throne.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Bishop E.: *Liturgica Historica*, p 21.

## THE ALTAR BOARD

On the surface of the Coptic Altar, an oblong rectangular slot is engraved to a depth of about 2.5 cm., in which a consecrated Altar-Board is loosely embedded. The Board is generally made of wood, or rarely of marble, upon which the following are painted:

1. A Cross or a number of crosses.
2. The first and last Greek alphabetical “aw”.
3. Occasionally few selected psalms such as:  
“His foundation is in the holy mountains.  
The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all  
the dwellings of Jacob.  
Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of  
God.” (Ps. 86 (87): 1, 2)  
“... even Your Altars, O Lord of hosts, my King  
and my God.” (Ps. 83: 3)

Other churches use different Altar-Board materials. For example the Syrian Church uses stone or wood, the Nestorian Church use leather, but the Greek Church uses what they call “antimension *antiksiou*” which is made of linen.

It is highly likely that Altar-Boards date back to the times of persecution, to facilitate celebrating the Liturgy of Eucharist whenever it was possible. On the other hand, others believe that it came in replacement of Portable Altars.



*AN ALTER BOARD*



## PORTABLE ALTARS

For many centuries Portable Altars have been used in the Coptic, Syrian and Armenian Churches.<sup>(1)</sup> However, they have been substituted recently with Altar-Boards, since they are more convenient. Thus in urgent cases an Altar-Board can adequately be used with an ordinary table to form a temporary Altar, since an Eucharistic celebration cannot take place in the absence of an Altar-Board, even if the Altar is consecrated.

Some Churches, on the other hand, have catered for the absence of Altar-Boards in emergency cases. For example, the Syrian Church tolerated the celebration of the Eucharist on a leaf of the Gospel.<sup>(2)</sup>

Fr. Theodosius, the Syrian Patriarch, says that if there was no Altar, the Priest could celebrate the Eucharist by putting the patent on a handkerchief tied around his neck, and hold the chalice with his left hand,<sup>(3)</sup> and proceed with the service.

The Nestorian canons have also tolerated consecrating the Eucharist over a deacon's hands, provided that an express permission is first obtained from a bishop.<sup>(4)</sup>

The following are two actual incidents, of practising the Eucharist without another due to emergency circumstances, as recorded in the history of the church:

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(1) Pocknee: *The Christian Altar*, p 44.

(2) Renaudot: *Nit. Orient.* Vol. 2, p 46.

(3) Fr Mankarious Awad Alla part 1 p59

(4) J.A. ASSEMAN: *De Cathal. Seu. Pat. Chald. et Nestor.*, p 120

1. Theodore, Bishop of Tyre, conducted the Eucharist on the hands of his deacon to give communion to a pilgrim monk.

2. It is said that while Lucian of Antioch (312 A.D.) was in prison, it was impossible for his disciples to smuggle an Altar into the prison. As he wished to take communion before his death, he told his followers that he himself was an Altar, and celebrated the Liturgy upon his own chest...<sup>(1)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> PG 114:409.

# THE CIBORIUM

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## THE CANOPY

The majority of the main Coptic Altars, and sometimes the side ones, are surmounted by a wooden or stone canopy, which rests upon four pillars of stone or marble. It is known as the Ciborium; a term that is probably derived from the Greek word 'Kiborion = kiporion', which originally meant the hollow seed case of the Egyptian water lily. Later, the term was applied to drinking cups because of the similarity in shape between them, and eventually it was adopted by the church for the above- mentioned canopy which takes the shape of the bowl of a cup.

More widely, this term is now commonly employed in the liturgical terminology to designate:

1. The structure that is mentioned above.
2. The covering suspended over the bishop's throne.
3. The dome-shaped vessel that is used to contain the holy communion for the sick.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Canopy - in general - serves a double purpose:

Firstly, being provided with curtains hung between the pillars, it served to veil the Altar at certain points in the service, it is said, at the Epiclesis (descent of the Holy Spirit) and the

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<sup>(1)</sup> W.H. Freestone. Sacrament reserved. 1917, p 207 - 8.

confession. This custom disappeared from both the Eastern and Western Churches.

Evidences supporting this ancient custom are:

1. There are four bars between the pillars of the Canopy in the Church of Abu-Serga in Old Cairo, upon which veils used to hang.

2. Such veils were known in the Church of Agia Sophia in Constantinople.

3. In a homily, St. John Chrysostom says:<sup>(1)</sup>

“When the Sacrifice is brought forth, and Christ, the Lord’s Lamb, is sacrificed, when you hear the words; Let us all pray together, when you behold the curtains drawn aside, then think that heaven is parted and the angels are descending”.

4. A striking evidence from the Western Church is quoted from the Liber Pontificalis during the seventh and eighth centuries in Rome. It proves without any shadow of doubt that curtains or veils were suspended around the Ciborium of the great Roman Churches, and that the Altars were completely veiled from all sides.

5. It is recorded that Pope Sergius (687-701 AD), gave the Church of St. Peter eight veils; four white and four scarlet. Pope John VI (701-705 AD), also presented a set of Altar veils

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<sup>(1)</sup> EP. ad. phes. PG. 62:29. - See 1 Cor., hom. 36:5

to St. Paul's Church outside the walls, while Pope Leo III (795-816 AD), gave several sets of veils to the Lateran basilica and St. Paul's, outside the walls, which were in various colours and shapes, decorated with jewels and pearls.

Secondly, Canopies have always added the mark of honour or sanctity to the things or persons concerned. They have been used over the rulers' seats as a sign of honour, and on the Altar for it is the throne of the sovereign of the King of Kings.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Jews used a Canopy over the 'Torah Shrine', for it contained the sacred book of the Law of God, also during marriage ceremonies; where the couple stand under a Canopy 'huppah' 'known as the marriage chamber'.

For this reason, not only did the Early Church use Canopies over the Altar, but it used them also over the bishops' thrones,<sup>(2)</sup> and over the fonts as in the Church of Dora in Syria.

Among the examples given of historical Altar Canopies is the silver Canopy which Constantine presented to the Lateran Basilica; a magnificent type, but it only lasted until the fifth century when it was carried away by the Visigoths and replaced by another. Less exotic one given by Pope Sixtus III. In the sixth century, Paul the Silentiary uses the term (tower), when he describes the Canopy over Tiupyoc the Altar of the Church of Agia Sophia in Constantinople.

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(1) E. Bishop: Liturg. Hist., p 22.

(2) Basil Minchin: Outward & Visible, 1961, p.62.

## THE COPTIC CIBORIUM

The Coptic Ciborium is distinguished by its dome- shape compared with the Western styles which tend more towards the conical or pyramidal structure.

Although the Coptic Altar is bare, devoid of any ornament or painting, the Coptic Ciborium is generally rich in paintings on both the interior and exterior surfaces. The icon of the Lord, surrounded by the Cherubim and the Seraphim often occupies the centre of the dome, for it represents the heaven of heavens in which the Lord and His heavenly creatures dwell. Icons of the four Evangelists are painted on the four pillars; as if the four corners of the universe are sanctified by the word of the Gospel. On the top, a large Cross is mounted in the centre of the Ciborium and sometimes another four crosses are mounted on the sides, so that they all refer to the five wounds of the Lord.



## **THE TRIBUNE**

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Behind the Altar and around the eastern wall of the Sanctuary lies the 'Tribune'. It is often made of marble or stone and consists of seven semi-circular steps. Typical examples are the ancient Church of St. Menas in Marriout, near Alexandria, and the Churches of Old Cairo: the Suspended Church, Abu-Serga, Abu-Sefein and St. Barbara.

The Book 'The Guide of the Coptic Museum',<sup>(1)</sup> it is stated that there is a semi-circular tribune, made of marble at the apse of the Church, while the wall around it is decorated by mosaics. On the Tribune, presbyter seats are fitted, and at the centre of the top Step, stands the seat of the Patriarch or the Bishop. From this seat the bishop delivers his sermons, facing the congregation while the Altar lies before him,<sup>(2)</sup> and the priests occupy their seats around him according to their ranks.

### **THE BISHOP'S THRONE (Synthronè)**

The bishop's seat is usually known as Synthronè "qronon" (throne) in Eastern Churches, and "Cathedra" "kaqel rià" in Western Churches. It is defined as a thing that is sat upon with particular reverence due to one's position. A church that is provided with such a seat is known as a 'Cathedral Church'.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The Guide to the Coptic Museum vol 1 p212

<sup>(2)</sup> Davies: Early Christian Church. p 209.

It is probably of historical interest that this type of seats common in the early days of the Roman Empire, and was later made use of by the rhetoricians and philosophers.<sup>(1)</sup> The Jewish synagogue system also made provision for this hierarchical structure, and provided special seats for key officials, known as ‘proto-cathedral *prowto kaqel ra*’ seats, as mentioned in (Mark 12: 39) of the New Testament. The same custom was transferred to the Christian Church<sup>(2)</sup> ever since the dawn of Christianity.

Eusebius refers to the bishopric seat of Jerusalem as the Apostolic Throne, due to the fact that St. James the Apostle was the first to occupy it. He further states that the seat was preserved in his days in the Church of Jerusalem.<sup>(3)</sup>

St. Gregory Nazianzen also calls the seat of Alexandria; ie. St. Mark’s Throne,<sup>(4)</sup> a seat of distinguished reverence that St. Peter, the Alexandrian Pope and last of Martyrs, dared not sit on, though it was used by his successors.<sup>(5)</sup>

It is also said that the wooden seat of St. Peter, the Apostle, is still preserved in the Vatican Basilica.<sup>(6)</sup>

As we have mentioned before, the bishop’s seat, together the Presbyters’ seats were positioned behind the Altar.

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(1) Ibid.

(2) Harvard: Dictionary of Catholic Church, 781. Davies: Origin & Develop. Of Early Church Architecture, p.94

(3) Euseb. H.E. 7:19.

(4) Hook’s Church. 1887, p. 138. - Halett: Catholic Dict.,1951, p125.

(5) Fr. Malaty: Pope Peter I, p 36.

(6) Davies: Dict. of Liturgy & Worship, p 123,124.

A wisely chosen location aiming to illustrate that the clergy have no superiority over the congregation, except as servants of the Altar. They practice their priestly duties only in the merits of the sacrifice, and not due to self-righteousness.

## **THE BISHOP'S THRONE AND BISHOP'S AUTHORITY**

The bishop's throne undoubtedly the oldest of a bishop's authority, and many centuries before they assumed the carrying of pastoral staves and golden croziers, they were instead on their thrones or cathedras on the day of their consecration, as a sign that they were invested with authority to preside over the church in their dioceses.<sup>(1)</sup> The Apostolic Constitutions says.<sup>(2)</sup> "And early in the morning let him be placed on his throne in a place set apart for him among the bishops, they all, are to give him a kiss in the Lord".

Originally, bishops were consecrated in their bishoprics, but since the Middle Ages, consecrations in both the Eastern and Western Churches have taken place in the church of the Pope or Patriarch. At a later date they are seated upon their thrones in a separate ceremony.

## **CHARACTER OF THE BISHOP'S THRONE**

According to the early writings of Tertullian, St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Didas Apost... etc., the

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hallett, p 125

<sup>(2)</sup> Apost. Const. 8:5.

bishop's seat was distinguished from other seats by its linen covering.<sup>(1)</sup>

On the other hand, opinions differ in the materials used for the Apostolic thrones:

1. The first possibility, according to Davies,<sup>(2)</sup> is that it was made of wood, and that accounts for its total disappearance.

2. Others believe that the majority of early bishop's thrones were not made of wood nor ivory, but rather of masonry, usually stones or marbles.<sup>(3)</sup> In that time, marble chairs or stalls were so common in theatres, (thermae) and amphitheatres of pagan Rome. For example the thermae of Caracalla alone contained 600 of such marble stalls. It is more likely, then, that many of bishops thrones, e.g. at the Church of St. John Lateran, St. Clement and Cosmedin in Rome, were actually taken from one of those Roman thermae. A group of similar seats, cut out of the solid rock, are still preserved in the catacombs of Rome.

It should be remembered that ancient thrones held the spirit of the Early Church, in that they came bare and had

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<sup>(1)</sup> Tert. De Exhort. Chest. 7. - Clement. Alex. : Strom 6:13; 106.

Origen: in Math. 16:22. - Didis. Apost. 12.

<sup>(2)</sup> Davies: Origin & develop.... p. 96, 97.

<sup>(3)</sup> Bond F.: Stalls and Tabernacle work, 1910, p 101.

nothing fanciful about them. They only came a bit higher than the remaining presbyters' seats.<sup>(1)</sup> For this reason, one of the charges laid against Paul of Samosata was that he built himself a 'stately tribune, as one of the rulers of the world'.<sup>(2)</sup>

## **THE BISHOP'S THRONE IN THE MODERN AGE**

"St. John Chrysostom preached from the 'ambo' in the nave of the church, in order that the congregation might hear him with greater ease."<sup>(3)</sup>

Surely, due to the expansion in size of church buildings, a bishop's seats became movable and could be shifted to the nave. Not a single seat is left in the tribune of Coptic Churches.

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(1) Hook's Church Dict., p. 138.

(2) Eusebius H.E. 7:30.

(3) Davies: Origin & Develop.... p.94

## THE NICHE

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The Niche is the apse that represents the eastern wall of the Sanctuary, which surrounds the tribune. It is often occupied with the icon of the Lord Jesus Christ coming on the cloud, carried by the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the four Living creatures, with the twenty four heavenly Presbyters offering incense. The Lord appears holding the planet Earth with one hand, for He is the Almighty one, and the pastoral rod with the other hand, for He is the Shepherd and Redeemer who liberates men from the captivity of sin.

Thus in this sense, the Niche represents the bosom of God, for the Lord longs for His church, and she waits for His coming.

In front of this icon, a sanctuary lamp that is permanently lit, is fitted. It is known as ‘the Perpetual lamp’ and represents the star which appeared to the wisemen and guided them to where the Lord was born.

Directly above this icon, in most cases, there is a small window (aperture), from which the sun beams enter at sunrise.

# **CHAPTER 8**

## **THE ICONOSTASIS**

The Iconostasis (ICON-STAND) represents one of the most important architectural features of Orthodox Churches.<sup>(1)</sup> It is a rigid screen of wood or marble, composed of icons of the Lord, His angels and His saints. It lies between the Sanctuary, where the Lord is permanently present, and the nave of the church where worshippers assemble seeking the divine life.

## **EARLY ICONOSTASISES**

Original forms of the various Iconostasises were found very early in the Christian Churches. We find mention of such screens in the writings of the Early Fathers as St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Chrysostom, and the writings of some historians like Eusebius.

The form and height of these screens varied. They were made of particular materials and decorated with sculpture and paintings. On the inner side, that is, on the side of the Sanctuary a curtain was fitted which was drawn open or closed in accordance with the various stages of the church service. In this fashion the Sanctuary screen made the Sanctuary visible and inaccessible at the same time.<sup>(2)</sup>

It is noteworthy that in some ancient Coptic Churches, in particular the Church in the Monastery of St. Makarious the Great which dates back to the seventh century, Sanctuary doors

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<sup>(1)</sup> Leorid Ouspenski the meaning of Icons, Basle. 1952

<sup>(2)</sup> Ibid.

are quite large and form an arch almost reaching the ceiling, as if the early Copts were stressing that nothing separates the people from the Holy of Holies or prevents them participating in the Consecration.

## **NOMENCLATURE**

Several terms were introduced to refer to early Iconostasis or Sanctuary Screens:

1. ‘**kiukl iv**’ ie., grating, a term that suggests one of the early Iconostasis shapes. A Typical example of it was mentioned by Eusebius when he talked about the wooden grating of the great church of Tyre “wrought with so delicate an art as to be a wonder to behold”.

2. ‘**diastula**’ ie., a barrier made of columns. This took the form of a row of columns with architraves, or it was fitted with wooden or marble panels between the columns. Upon them, icons were painted, and verses from the Holy Scriptures were engraved or painted.

3. ‘**druFokta**’ i.e. a fence. Sometimes it is called a veil; an inaccurate terminology, for the Christian Church never accepts a veil similar - in concept - to that of the Temple of Solomon. It has been knocked down forever when the Lord fulfilled the reconciliation between God and man through the Cross.

4. ‘**tekpalon**’ (temple) or Temple. This term was introduced following the construction of the silver screen in the

church of “Agia Sophia” by Justinian. It was decorated with icons of the Lord Jesus Christ, His angels and prophets, and upon its main door a cross was surmounted. It either looked like the front of old temples or it aimed to express the Christian idea of the shrine where God is worshipped...

## **FUNCTION OF THE ICONOSTASIS**

Two different attitudes are given to the evolvement of Iconostasis, or its equivalent in the Western Church “The Altar Screen”:

### ***FIRST : THE WESTERN INTERPRETATION***

1. F. Bond,<sup>(1)</sup> gives a practical reasoning for the appearance of this screen in Western Churches: “Where there was an aisled quire, screens were necessary to shelter the clergy or monks during the long offices, from draughts in unheated churches, as well as to prevent the distraction which the movements of worshippers in the aisles and ambulatory chapels, might cause to those in the quire”.

On the other hand, Fr. Dix<sup>(2)</sup> offers another theory to the question in hand. He reckons that it came to use, at first, in North Syria towards the end of the fourth century, and was soon spread widely in both Eastern and Western Churches. Later it was utilised in the Byzantine Church as an icon-stand;

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<sup>(1)</sup> Francis Bond: Screens and Galleries in English Churches, Oxford, 1908

<sup>(2)</sup> Dix: The shape of the Liturgy, p. 14, 15.

an item of liturgical function and an essential entity in the rite of the Christian worship.

In his opinion, the original form of the screen was a solid veil aiming to prevent the layman from watching the consecration and this conforms with the attitudes of the Syrian Church of that time, which can be summarised as follows:

**I.** The writings of some of the Eastern Fathers, such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril of Jerusalem clearly indicate the character of fear, reverence and mystery that was followed with regard to the Eucharist. In turn, according to Father Dix, the Iconostasis came as a result of such a character.

**II.** The service of the Eucharistic liturgy began to be restricted to the Clergy alone. On this ground secret prayers were introduced for the clergy's use without the participation of the Congregation.

Alongside these lines, Fr. Dix concludes that the screen came into use so as to separate the clergy from the laity.

## **SECOND: THE EASTERN INTERPRETATION**

**1.** The Iconostasis was introduced as a sign of the reverence towards the mystery of the Altar, or the mystery of Christ the Victim, but surely that was not the prime cause of it.

The Orthodox Church does not underestimate the tremendous reverence associated with the liturgy of Eucharist, but on the other hand it must be in a biblical spirit, i.e. without

isolation from the concept of love. In other words the Holy Scriptures combine fear and reverence, with love, for God says: “If I am indeed Father, where is my honour? If I am indeed Master, where is my respect?!”.

This is further confirmed in the writings of St. Paul, for although He had close connection with God, acknowledged many divine mysteries and saw unspeakable things, he described God saying, “Who only has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man has seen, nor can see”. (Mal. 6: 16).

Moreover, such reverence towards the Sacrifice in the orthodox Concept does not suggest a passive role of the layman in the liturgical service. On the contrary, the Orthodox liturgy is believed to be the outcome of the combined action of both the clergy and laymen. Through the service, the deacon asks the congregation to take their part in the liturgy by praying for the sick, the travellers, the dead, the repentance, for those who offer the oblations etc... He also asks them to pray for the Pope, bishops, priests, deacons, monks, nuns etc....

In brief, the congregation play a positive role in the ecclesiastical service by offering prayers, petitions, thanksgiving and hymns.

Lastly, we wish to explain that secret prayers were never Added due to the frightful nature of the Sacrifice, nor to isolate laymen from the service of liturgy, but rather to provide the opportunity for both clergy and congregation to pray secretly, each one on his own behalf and for the others with a humble heart.

2. Perhaps the most valid motive for the introduction of Iconostasis came as a defence against Iconoclastic Movement.<sup>(1)</sup> It expressed the Church's wish to confirm our relation with the heavenly creatures and the saints, in Jesus Christ.

## **SYMBOLISM OF THE ICONOSTASIS**

1. The Iconostasis, being a part of the church building reveals the reality of the Church as an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem, an image of the future transfiguration of man and the regeneration of the world, where "God fills all in all". (Eph.1:23).

No doubt, the icons of the Lord, His mother, Heavenly creatures, prophets, apostles, martyrs and righteous people fitted upon the Iconostasis provide a heavenly atmosphere for worshippers. St. John Chrysostom says, "Man as if transferred to heaven itself stands near the throne of Glory. He flies with the Seraphim....".

2. The various icons hanging on the Iconostasis declare to a great extent, the reconciliation between the two worlds, the heavenly and the earthly, establishing that all previous separation has been overcome through the Cross! A quick glance at it is sufficient to indicate that the human beings are counted with the heavenly ones. They participate in their life

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<sup>(1)</sup> Fr Mankarious Awad Alla, Manarat El Akdas vol 1

and share in their worship. St. Ambrose says:<sup>(2)</sup> “As our hearts are taken up to heaven, we sing with the angels this hymn...”.

**3.** The Iconostasis also supports the church doctrine that our fathers and brothers who departed in the Lord are not far away from us. The death of their bodies never separated them from the church nor did it destroy the bond of love they had revealed towards the salvation of mankind.

On this basis, we can say that the Iconostasis is a symbol for reserving the first portion of the nave to the saints who are, in fact, one with their militant brothers.

## **THE COPTIC ICONOSTASIS**

In spite of the successive waves of burning and demolition which the Coptic church has suffered at the various stages, it is still considered rich with ancient Iconostasis. Typical examples are found in the churches of Old Cairo, in particular the churches of Abu-Serga and St. Mary, whose Iconostases are remarkable beautiful, carved and inlaid with ebony, ivory and cedar wood, and carry a large number of Icons and Symbols...

## **THE DOORS**

The Coptic Iconostasis, which was apparently influenced by the Byzantine version contains three doors; the

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<sup>(2)</sup> Fr. Malaty : Christ in the Eucharist, p 440, 441.

Royal door as the entrance to the principal Sanctuary, and two other doors for the side sanctuaries.

It is almost certain that Royal doors existed since the early generations of Sanctuary Screens. They were called “Royal or Holy doors” because at them, oblations were offered, where the priest selected the “Lamb”, the bread that was sanctified and changed into the Body of the Lord the King of Kings and the Holy One!

Its opening during the Liturgy symbolises heaven itself so that we may catch a glimpse of its splendour.

As the Iconostasis declares the reconciliation between God and man, the unity between heaven and earth, the three doors refer to the function of the Holy Trinity in realising such reconciliation and achieving such unity.

The design and use of these doors, in the Coptic Church, is guided by a number of traditions, mainly:

1. As we have pointed out before, only the clergy are allowed to enter through the Sanctuary doors and only at restricted times of the service. This practice symbolised the entrance of the whole church to the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ, the Chief Priest.

In some cases the main Iconostasis is erected so that it may be protruding in relation to the side Iconostasis, as in the churches of Abu-Serga and Harett Zewella. This arrangement allows access to the main Sanctuary via two side doors (see the diagram). They are used in the rite of processions during the

feasts, and through them the deacons enter to the Sanctuary ground.

2. Upon entering the Sanctuary, the priest must face the Altar and step through the right hand side of the door using his right leg and bowing his head... as if stepping into the Kingdom of heaven, for he is a child of God who stands at God's right hand (Mt. 25).

A similar protocol is observed upon stepping out of the Sanctuary. This time he leaves by the left side of the door, in reverence, keeping his eyes fixed on the Altar... as if confirming that his inner eyes are focused on God's Altar or the throne of God!

3. The keys of these doors are kept with the archdeacon.

4. The doors are usually decorated with icons and carvings, in Addition to verses from the Holy Scriptures as:

“Be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of Glory may come in”. (Ps. 23: 9).

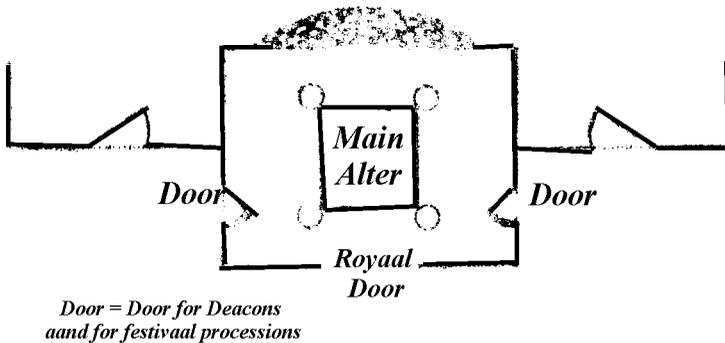
“Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise you God! O Zion!” For He strengthens the bars of your gates. He blessed your sons within you. (Ps. 147: 12, 13).

“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it”. (Ps. 118:19,20).

Occasionally the following words are inscribed on the top of the Royal door, “Hail to the Sanctuary of God the Father”.

Here we wish to point out that folding doors were known in Coptic Iconostasis, as in the church of St. Mary at the Syrian Monastery. They serve as a rigid screen that completely veils the Sanctuary when they are closed, and fully expose it when they are opened.

A Diagram illustrating the side doors to the main sanctuary: they were used by the deacons during processions at feast celebrations.



## **THE WINDOWS**

On each side of the Coptic Sanctuary doors there existed a small window, cut about one and a half meters above the floor. These were originally used during the persecution periods, where two deacons watched the church through them. In case of an attack, they notified the priest, who in turn hid the sacrifice, quenched the candles and tore away the altar clothing.

As a supplementary function, communion was sometimes given through these windows since the Holy Elements must not be taken outside the Sanctuary, and the laity were not permitted in it. However, the rite of communion was usually conducted through two side windows specially cut for that purpose on the side walls of the Sanctuary.

## **POSITIONING AND ORDER OF ICONS**

Positioning of the various icons upon the Iconostasis is traditionally governed by a number of guidelines:

- + On the right side of the Royal door, the icon of our Lord Jesus Christ is fitted. He appears holding a sheet of the Gospel showing the verse “I am the Good Shepherd”. This icon reminds us that Jesus Christ is the unique gate leading to the heavenly Kingdom. He is the Good Shepherd who opened the gates to heaven through His life-giving sacrifice.

Next to this icon appears the icon of St. John the Baptist, the Angel who prepared the way for the Lord's coming.

Next, comes the icon of the "Patron Saint" or the "Icon of the Church", for it portrays the Saint in whose honour the Church was built. It is usually followed by a number of selected icons of Saints and Martyrs, or incidents from both the New and Old Testaments.

On the opposite side of the Royal Door appears the icon of St. Mary, the Mother of God (THEOTOKOS). She represents the whole church and the Queen who sits on the right hand of the King; Jesus Christ.

This icon is followed by the icons of the Annunciation, Archangel Michael, St. Mark the Evangelist and perhaps a selection of famous Apostles.

+ Directly above the Royal Door the icon of the last supper is mounted. It shows Christ giving communion to His disciples, which illustrates and signifies the Sacerdotal office of Christ as a priest.

On both sides of the above icon we usually find icons of the twelve disciples. They assure us of the apostolic nature of our church. It is established on the apostolic faith, and continues to exist in an apostolic way, and is shepherded by apostolic pastors.

+ On the top of the Iconostasis a cross is mounted and a view of the Golgotha is displayed: the Virgin Mary stands on one side and St. John the disciple stands on the other side.

## **THE CANDLES**

Before every icon a candle is hung. They are known as “Lampadas”, and resemble the light of Christ who shines through His saints.

The exception to this is the icon of the Lord Jesus Christ, for Christ Himself is the “light” who illuminates the entire church.

## **THE OSTRICH EGGS**

A main feature which 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 emblematic of hope and resurrection, or the risen spiritual life in Jesus Christ. It is said that when Pontius Pilate asked St. Mary the Magdalene of how Jesus rose from the dead, she brought an egg and presented him with the question. “Tell me how a small chick emerges from this egg when it is born”?!

St. Augustine confirms this symbolism by saying.<sup>(1)</sup> “Let us place our egg, that is our hope, under the wings of that hen”.

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Augustine

Perhaps this practice corresponds to the tradition of exchanging coloured eggs, especially red eggs, between the Christians on Easter day. It also explains the finding of marble eggs in early tombs as those in the tomb of St. Theodora and St. Balbina and others.

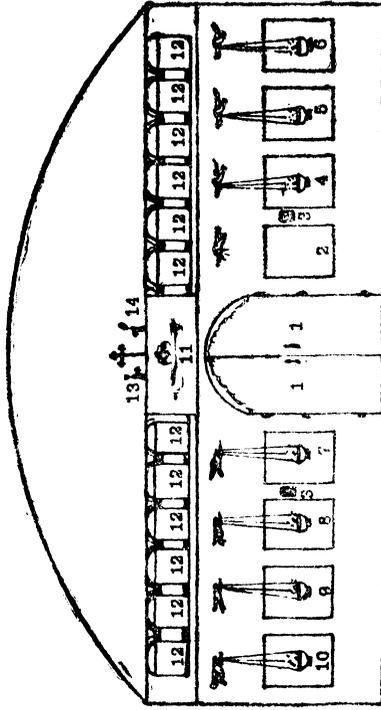
Another factor that accounts for using Ostrich eggs in churches arises from the traditional belief that after laying her eggs, the Ostrich must keep staring at them in order to speed up their hatching. Taking her eyes away will produce opposite results. Likewise, when the Christian walks into the church, he ought to concentrate all his thoughts and attention to the divine worship, leaving behind all earthly worries lest his prayers should be spoilt and lost<sup>(1)</sup>.



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(1) Mourad Kamel: Coptic Egypt, p. 76

Butler: Ancient Churches of Egypt, Vol. 2. P. 87.



- 1. The Royal Door.
- 2. Icon of Christ.
- 3. Window.
- 4. ST. John the Baptist.
- 5. Icon of the Patron Saint, or the Icon of the Church.
- 6. Icon of Martyr, Saint, or any incident from the New or the Old Testament.
- 7. ST. Mary (Theotokos).
- 8. The Annunciation.
- 9. Icon of Archangel Michael.
- 10. Icon of ST. Mark.
- 11. The Last Supper.
- 12. The Disciples.
- 13. ST. Mary.
- 14. ST. John, the Disciple

# **CHAPTER 9**

## **THE ICONS**

## **ICONS AND THE CHURCH BUILDING**

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Icons represent a very essential item of the church building. As you enter the church you find them displayed upon the Iconostasis, and covering a large proportion of the side walls: the Sanctuary, the Nave and the Baptistry. However, such a wide application was never contemplated to be for decoration, nor to reflect a particular culture, or express artistically a certain religious affection.

Icons, in their authentic reality, hold an evangelic message, an educational role, and contribute to the life of worship in the church. Through the simple language of colours, they reveal mysteries of the Holy Gospel, illustrate doctrines of the church and release the believers' feelings to the world to come!

Needless to say, icons have been the subject of a fierce war from elements external to the church, and other within the church. They regard them as a continuation of the idolatrous mind which has crept into the church's life. For this reason. I find myself obliged to cover the subject of "Icons" in relation to the Holy Bible and the writings of the Early fathers. I shall also discuss their history, art, and lastly, briefly mention the character of the Coptic Icons.

- I. Icons and the Holy Bible.**
- II. Icons and Church Education.**
- III. Icons and the Spiritual Life.**
- IV. Veneration of Icons.**

- V. Icons of Christ.**
- VI. Icons of Saints.**
- VII. Icons of Heavenly Creatures.**
- VIII. Icons Through the Ages.**
- IX. Icons and Art.**
- X. Coptic Icons.**

# **I        ICONS AND THE HOLY BIBLE**

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Indeed, the Holy Bible is a remarkably manifested divine Icon. It is portrayed by the Holy Spirit as a means of revealing God's love towards us in our own language. It shows His plans for our salvation and brings us to the eternal glories. The power of this written Icon does not lie in its letters, but rather in the mystical and penetrating Life-giving Spirit, who is capable of attracting the human souls to gain unity with God.

On the other hand, Icons are an open Bible, offered to all people through the simple and universal language of colours. Not only do they demonstrate events from the Old and New Testaments but they also touch on our relation with heaven and the heavenly creatures, and hence flame up our enthusiasm for the glories.... They serve to intensify our fellowship with the Holy Trinity and lift the souls beyond this world! In other words they help to uncover the mysteries of the Scripture, its concepts, doctrines and spirit.

## **ICONS AND THE LAW OF MOSES**

Perhaps someone would come up with the question: If Icons are an open Bible, then where do we stand from the commandment: "You shall not make yourself a graven thing, not any similitude. You shall not adore them, and you shall not serve them, for I am the Lord, Your God". (Exod. 20: 4, 5).

## **1. EXHORTATION AGAINST IDOLATROUS WORSHIP**

The Christian church, undoubtedly, is committed to observe the above commandment, but rather in its true spiritual concept, for “The letter kills but the spirit quenches”.

If we examine this commandment closely, we find that its main emphasis was to prevent any type of inclination into the idolatrous worship and not to forbid using the images for themselves, a very essential commandment to the Jew, for they were known to fall into two kinds of idolatrous blemishes:

**A.** They were tempted by the example of the surrounding pagans. King Solomon gives the best example when he fell into the worship of foreign gods upon marrying pagan wives.

**B.** Their confusion between the idolatrous worship and that of the True God. This is evident from their worship to the calf (Exod. 32: 5), as a symbolic means of worshipping the True God.

To this effect Fr. John Damascus say:

“These injunctions were given to the Jews on account of their proneness to idolatry. Now we, on the contrary, are no longer in leading strings (on the leash). Speaking theologically, it is given us to avoid superstitious errors, to be with God in the knowledge of the truth, to worship God alone, to enjoy the fullness of His knowledge. We have passed the stage of

infancy, and reached the perfection of manhood. We receive our habit of mind from God, and know what may be imaged and what may not”.

Alongside these lines, we can conclude that church’s interpretation of the above commandment is based, not on rejecting the idea of icons, but rather on their misuse. For this reason the early church was very cautious with images, as a result of being fully surrounded by pagan societies. As the time lapsed, the danger of idolatry was greatly reduced and hence images came to use on a large scale.

## **2. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN WORSHIP AND VENERATION**

Fr. John Damascus maintains that making images was forbidden in the Old Testament, on the ground that the Jews were unable to distinguish between the “Latreia”, ie. the adoration payable to God alone, and the “Prokynesis”, which is the veneration that may be offered to others. Now, Christians are no longer at the stages of childhood and can be entrusted to differentiate between the two aspects. Surely, they know the difference between the two aspects. Surely they know the difference between worshipping Christ and venerating His Holy Icon.

We can say with Fr. John that God, as The Wise Physician, provides the treatment according to the condition

and age of the patient. He forbade certain things to the ancient Israelites but allowed them to us, Christians.<sup>(1)</sup>

“You see the one thing to be aimed at, is not to adore a created thing more than the Creator, nor to give the worship of “Latreia” except to Him alone”. For He also says, “You shall not have strange gods other than Me. You shall not make to yourself a graven thing, nor any similitude. You shall not adore them, and you shall not serve them, for I am The Lord your God”. And again, “Overthrow their altars, and break down their statues, and break, their idols in pieces. For you shall not adore a strange god”. And a little further on, “You shall not make for yourselves gods of metal”.

FR. JOHN DEMASCUS<sup>(2)</sup>

## **IMAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

No wonder that despite His clear orders to His people with respect to images, God instructed them to make a number of specified images. Once again not as decorating ornaments to the House of God, but as substantial elements in the rite of worship.

The Tabernacle as a whole, and later the Temple were totally designed by God Himself and came as superb icons exhibiting heaven (Heb. 8:5, Exod. 25:40). They included such items as the two statues of the cherubim fitted upon the cover

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(1) John Damascene: On icons.

(2) Ibid.

of the “Ark of Testament”. The statue of the bronze serpent, and that of the bronze oxen.

These are striking evidences that God’s objective was not to ban images, but more specifically Authorise and control their use personally. By no means would He gives them the liberty to make statues according to their own discretion.<sup>(1)</sup> No surprise then, if God dictated every aspect to the holy images; their design, materials and dimensions. He even went to the extent of naming the persons to be in charge of their construction and filled them with spiritual wisdom so that they might accomplish the job without deviation.

## **1. THE CHERUBIM OF ARK**

The Lord commanded Moses to make two cherubim with their wings spread upwards so that they overshadow the cover of the Ark. These were not just symbols to remind the people of God’s presence, but they represented the true presence of God; who is riding upon the cherubim (Ps. 18: 10; Ezk. 11: 22). Before them prayers were offered:

**1.** There, God met with His people, spoke with them and accepted their prayers, for He said, “There, I will meet with you, and from between the two cherubim that are upon the Ark of Testimony, I will speak with you...” (Exod. 25: 22).

**2.** Before the Ark, the prophets and the elders of the people worshipped and sang the hymns of the Lord.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hallett: A Catholic Dict., p 422.

3. In the story of Ussah (2 Sam. 6: 67), the Bible tells us that when the oxen of the chariot carrying the Ark stumbled, Ussah stretched up his hands to hold it lest it should fall down, but God struck him, and he died, a fair indication of the sanctity of the Ark together with its cherubim!

Anba Yousab El-Abbah says:

“God instructed His servant Moses to make a wooden Ark over-laid with gold. On its cover he was to mount two cherubim designed to look like humans standing on their feet, having stretched wings and facing the exterior house. Inside the Ark he was to deposit the tablets of Testaments, the gold pot of menna and Aaron’s rod which flowered.

Moses and all his people worshipped before this Ark, and the Lord spoke to him from between the two cherubim.

The Ark represented God Himself for:

- + Whenever the Ark moved, Moses would say, “Arise, O Lord, and scatter your enemies: let them flee before you”. And whenever it was at rest, Moses would say, “Return, O Lord, to the millions of Israel”. (Num. 10: 35, 36).
- + “Joshua and the elders of Israel fell on the earth upon their faces before the Ark of the Lord until the evening”. (Josh. 6: 7).

- + “So Israel brought home the Ark of the Lord with much shouting and blowing of trumpets”. (2 Sam. 6: 15).

Anba Yousab El-Abbah

In Addition, the image of the cherub was displayed on the screen of the Tabernacle, which separated the Holy and the Holy of Hollis. It appeared also in the Temple of Solomon as a repeated piece of art covering the Temple walls and the lintel of the door (1 Kings 6: 27-29; 2 Chor 3: 7), as a sign of God’s presence in His holy House.

## **2. THE BRONZE SERPENT**

This is another example of an item demanded by God. It took the form of a bronze statue of a burning serpent mounted up on a pillar in the wilderness, and acted as a source of healing to those who behold it. (Num. 21: 8, 9).

It served as a symbol for the Crucified Messiah as the Lord says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life”. (John 3: 14, 15).

When the people began to misuse this valuable item and adored it as an idol, offering it oblations, it was smashed by Hezekiah. (2 Kings 18: 14).

## ICONS AND THE DIVINE INCARNATION

Perhaps the major factor in prohibiting images in the Old Testament was the non-physical nature of the Divinity, for God is uncircumscribed and invisible. The Apostle Paul says, “Being then, God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man”. (Acts 17: 29).

In the New Testament, however, Christianity was basically founded on the revelation of God through his Incarnated Son, “No man has seen God at any time; the Only-Begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1: 18). Through incarnation, the Icon of God was revealed to us, for when Philips asked Christ, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied”, the Lord answered, “Don’t you even yet know who I am, Philip, even after all this time I have been with you? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father!”. (John 14: 8, 9).

The physical appearance of God on earth has made it possible to draw His image; we could document the various events of His every day life style in the form of painted Icons as well as in written stories.

Fr. John Damascus comments on this point by saying, “When the invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form. When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in His boundless nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may

draw His likeness and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it.

Depict His ineffable condescension, His virginal birth, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Thabor, His all powerful sufferings, His death and His miracles, which proved His divinity, the deeds which He worked in the flesh through divine power, His saving Cross, His Tomb, His resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Paint all these in colours as well as in speech, in pictures as well as in books!

“Have no fear or anxiety”.

On the same subject, Anba Yousab El-Abbah concludes that the appearance of the Lord’s Icon and its use in the rite of worship came as a normal result of the divine incarnation. He says:

“God had no likeness nor a similitude. But He incarnated and took our nature, He became man and hence possessed a likeness and a similitude, for “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1: 15)... “He is the brightness of His glory and the design of His essence” (Heb. 2: 3).....”

St. Botros El-Sadamanti maintained the order of prayers by saying:

“The Icon of Crucifixion must be displayed up exterior to the first chorus, for Christ suffered outside the city. The priests should put on their black vestments and offer incense before the Icon of Crucifixion.

It was also ordered that the Icon of the Lord's burial should be made in order to fulfil the rite of burial on the Altar, and the Icon of Resurrection for the Resurrection Procession....”.

In the light of these concepts some of the fathers consider the Iconoclasts, not only as opposers to the utilisation of art as a means of the ritual worship but they also despise the Divine Incarnation; for he who looks down on the Lord's Icon despises His Incarnation.

## **CORRELATION BETWEEN VISIBLES AND INVISIBLES**

Needless to say, the divine Incarnation acted as a bridge that closed the gap between the Unseen God and the visible humans, and united the heavenly life with the earthly one. The word of God descended to earth with His heavens that the humans may enjoy a heavenly life. He Sanctified their lands and physical lives that they may reach beyond the materialistic world, as if the divine Incarnation has created a new dimension to our way of worship. We no longer regard the materialistic, as set-back to spirituality, but on the contrary, as a means to enjoy fully the eternal beauties. Through the divine Incarnation, the holy Icons became capable of exposing the spiritual and heavenly dominion.

## **II    ICONS AND CHURCH EDUCATION**

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According to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Icons play somewhat a similar role to the art of rhetoric and writing, so that he frequently refers to a discourse as a painting and the rhetor as a painter.<sup>(1)</sup>

Thus if the writings and sermons are considered as verbal Icons, then Icons, in turn, can be classified as pictured sermons and portrayed nooks. They are presented in a simple, universal language that can be interpreted by all tongues. The illiterate can grasp them as if reading a book or hearing a homily, and the educated can conceive what the writings are unable to explain. They have been the language of the universal church all over the ages.

Nobody can deny the distinguished role that Early Icons had played in educating us about the church's life in the Apostolic age, and bringing us in contact with the golden age of the Fathers. We could grasp the manner in which the gospel was applied in the Early Church, thus adding new dimensions to our understanding and enjoyment of the Bible.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **THE PEOPLE'S BOOK**

Such a work of art which covers the walls and ceiling of the church proved to be very effective in presenting the Bible to

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(1) Orations 11:2; 24:2; 2:13; 43:1. PG 35:833A, 117A, 421A 36:493A.

(2) K. Mc Clinton: Christian Church Art through the Ages, N.Y. 1962, p.5

the early Christians. In fact, this educational role acted as a ground for using Icons in churches. The following are typical examples:

1. St. Nilus of Sinai wrote a letter to the prefect Olympiadorus Eparchus, who built a church, and intended to decorate it with thousands of crosses and numerous paintings, displaying scenes of the normal daily life activities like hunting and fishing. His recommendations were that one cross could suffice, and instead of using hunting scenes, he would display events from the Holy Scriptures, painted up by a skilful artist. His words were, “Let the hand of the artist fill the church on both sides with pictures from the Old and New Testaments, in order that the illiterate, who cannot read the Divine Scriptures should, by gazing at the pictures bring to mind the valiant deeds of those who served God with all sincerity, and themselves be incited to rival the glories and ever memorable exploits, through which they exchange earth with heaven, preferring the invisible to the visible!”

2. In a letter from Pope Gregory (the Great) to Sernus, bishop of Marseilles, He says,<sup>(1)</sup> “We have been informed that fired with inconsiderate zeal you have smashed pictures of saints on the ground that pictures ought not to be worshipped. For forbidding their adoration you deserve praise, but for smashing them you must be censured”.

It is one thing to adore a painting, and quite another thing to learn, by a story told in a picture, to what homage

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Nilus of Sinai: Ep. AD Olympiodorum 4:16. PG 79:577. Pope Gregory ( the Great) : ep. 7:1.

ought to be offered. For what writing is to the literate, painting is to the uneducated. Paintings are employed in churches so that the illiterate can at least read, by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books.

Hence for the pagan especially, a picture takes the place of a book....

**3.** Fr. John Damascus speaks in defence of Icons, “When a pagan wants to know about your faith, take him to the church and let him stare at the Icons!.....”.

### III    ICONS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

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As I bring forth the subject to Icons and their effect on the spiritual life of believers, numerous stories come to my mind of current events related to persons who experienced repentance and companionship with God, via the Holy Spirit through Icons.

One night, as I was on the church a young man entered the church and walked towards the Sanctuary. There, in the quiet atmosphere and the faint candle-light reflected upon the Icons, he gazed at the Icons for a while and returned with tears in his eyes.

Later, I learned from him, that he had intended to commit suicide and was on his way to buy some sleeping tablets. He jumped into a tram, seeking an isolated area to end his life away from people. However, as he passed by the church and saw the faint rays of candle-light sparkling from the windows, an overwhelming desire drove him to have a last prayer before his departure. There, before the Sanctuary Icons and the peaceful atmosphere, he could not help his emotions: “How can I deprive myself from the companionship of these Saints in the Lord!?”. The looks on the martyrs’ faces reminded him of their eternal crowns. He assured me “I shall never despair again even if my troubles multiply ten times”.

It was a night that changed the course of his life; spiritually and psychologically, and even his personality. As he

found the peace of mind, his relations with the others have greatly improved.

Needless to say, all this was not achieved by a book he read or a sermon he heard, but by the powers of the Holy Spirit through Icons.

Saint Mary of Egypt also tells of her repentance<sup>(1)</sup>:

“Then I looked up over the door and saw an Icon of the Most Holy Mary the ‘Theotokos’, and the purity of her complexion put me to shame.

Now all my past miseries were clearly exhibited before my eyes and my sins tormented me.

Then I knelt before the Icon and begged for another chance to follow my Saviour. I asked the Virgin’s help.

I asked my Saviour to save me and lead me in His way”. We can say that if the defiled pictures spoil the insight of many persons, corrupt their minds and pollute their pure souls, the Holy Icons on the other hand, are instruments used by the Divine grace to help the mind in its meditation of God, flame the heart with regenerative repentance and lift up the soul to long for the heavenly matters.

The Christian sees in the Holy Icons a help in his journey with God. “At home, or on a journey, in hours of danger or in happy moments. An Orthodox wishes to see

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Mary of Egypt, Alexandria (Fr. T.Y.Malaty), p.26,27.

Icons, to gaze through these windows into the world beyond time and space, and he reassured that his earthly pilgrimage is only the beginning of another fulfilling life”.

## **SAYING OF THE FATHERS**

- + We are driven to meditation and contemplation of the Divine and spiritual matters through the visible Icons, each according to his spiritual needs.

Fr. John Damascene

- + (In the letter to Secundinus).  
I know you do not ask for the image of our Saviour to worship it as God, but as a reminder of the Son of God, so that you may be inflamed a new with love of Him Whose Icon you long to see.

Pope Gregory

- + We acquire Icons of the Saviour, the Mother of the Lord, the angels and the Saints in order to keep their images in our hearts and minds, and to supplement our deep love for them....

As long as we are in the human body, the senses are in need of perceptible materials to see; in order to transfer them to the heart. This is the objective of keeping these Icons before our eyes, at homes and in churches.

- + When we stand before the Holy Icon, the Lord of Hosts hears us, for He is nearer to us than the Icon itself, and many times He reveals himself before our eyes much more clearly than the representation in the Icon, does.
  
- + The Icons which we display in our homes and churches are not a collection of art for exhibition or decoration. Rather, they help us in practising the life of prayer through the visible matter.

Fr. John of Kronstadt

## **IV VENERATION OF ICONS**

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### **THE ICON AND THE ORIGINAL**

Surely, any honouring that may be paid to the holy Icons could never be directed to their materials, but is basically, a sign of the intimate meeting with the prototype whom they represent. To that effect St. Basil<sup>(1)</sup> says: “Every honour that is given to the icon passes to its prototype”, and Pope Gregory (the Great) also says<sup>(2)</sup>, “We do not prostrate ourselves before the icon as a divinity, but we adore Him whom we recall by means of the Icon, the advent of His birth, His Passion or His sitting on the Throne”.

### **VENERATION AND WORSHIP**

The Iconoclasts (persons opposed to icons) invariably play on the same tune:

How can we worship a created item?

How can we honour the materialistic objects, while “God in spirit and those worship must worship in spirit and truth?” (John 4: 24).

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Basil: on The Holy Spirit, Ch.18.

<sup>(2)</sup> Pope Gregory ( The Great ): Epistle 9:52.

We have already quoted selected saying of Fr. John Damascus in which he distinguished between two types of worship: (Lateria) which is payable to God alone, and Proskynesis which can be directed to others. It literally means bowing all the way to the ground and kissing it.

Fr. John classified the ‘Proskynesis’ or veneration into four categories, which have been mentioned without censure in the Old Testament. These are:

1. Homage Addressed to beings who can be described in a special sense as “friend of God”, especially angels, when Joshua saw the captain of the Lord’s host, by Jericho, it is written that “he fell on his face to the earth and did worship”. (Josh. 14).

A similar response was followed by Lot (Gen. 19: 1) and Daniel.

2. Homage offered to Holy places and things. “I will worship towards your holy temple”. (Ps. 5: 7). “Worship the footstool of His feet”. (Ps. 99: 5). “Israel worshipped towards the extremity of his staff”. (The Septuagint), since Jacob’s staff was regarded as a type of the cross.

3. Homage addressed to other persons set by the divine order in a position of superior dignity and authority. In this sense, Jacob is said to worship his elder brother Esau, Joseph’s brethren to worship Joseph, Jacob to worship Pharaoh; and generally speaking, the homage offered to kings.

4. Worship may be addressed to equals, as an indication of deep feelings towards each other; the Patriarch Abraham is said

to have worshipped the sons of Heth who were Pagans (Gen. 23: 12), as a sign of courtesy.

These are further supported by a number of typical examples of worship and other signs of reverence offered to material things, quoted by Fr. John Damascus:

**A.** The Iconoclasts themselves, in his time, never hesitated to express their reverence to the Holy Table, the Holy Bible and the Cross; by bowing down and kissing them, surely they could not think for one moment that such reverence was payable to the materials of stone, wood, paper or metal?!

**B.** There have been many items, in the Old Testament, which were treated with special reverence as holy. These include the Ark of Testament, Aaron's rod and the Pot of manna; things which have been fashioned by the hands of men.

**C.** St. John the Baptist considered himself unworthy to kneel down and undo the straps of the Lord's sandals (Mark 1: 8), not for the sandals material itself !

**D.** The ground in the vicinity of the flaming bush became holy, and Moses was obliged to take off his shoes as a sign of its holiness! Likewise, with his disciple Joshua when he met the captain of the Lord's host (Josh. 5: 15).

## SAYING OF THE FATHERS

- + Worshipping is one thing and veneration is another. To God alone worship is due; from all those who are high in heaven, on earth, and those who are under the earth.

We worship God and venerate His saints because of the Holy Spirit who fills them.

- + We do not worship the Icon's materials, but God who is represented by the Icon.
- + Be certain, my dear beloved, that when we kneel before the Cross, we direct our worship to the Crucified and not to the wood, otherwise we are obliged to kneel before every tree on the road.

FR. JOHN DAMASCENE

- + When we honour the book of Law, we do not bow to its material of leather or ink, but to the words of God it contains. Likewise, on venerating the Icon of Christ, I imagine myself worshipping Christ Himself, and not the wood or paint.....

By kissing the Icon of Christ, an Apostle or Martyr, we reach beyond the materialistics to the intimate spiritual contact with the prototype whom it represents.....

FR. LEONTIUS<sup>(1)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> See Sidney Heath: Romance of Symbolism. London 1909, p.16.

## CONSECRATION OF ICONS

According to the Coptic rite, veneration may only be given to consecrated church Icons. These receive consecration by a bishop or a priest - given permission under pressing circumstances and are anointed with the same Chrism which is used in baptism. Thus upon accepting the Holy Spirit, they are qualified to receive incensing, be kissed or accorded any other form of veneration. They are no longer memorial frames, but become in God's possession, and bear effective spiritual power which is capable of attracting the hearts to heaven, and positively contribute to the church's life.

This is revealed in the wording of the consecration rite; for after reciting the prayer of thanksgiving and incense offering, the priest prays<sup>(1)</sup>:

“O Master Lord.....

Who gave us the Law through Moses, since the beginning, and ordered your people to make the Ark of Testament, with the statues of the Cherubs to overshadow the altar with their wings, You granted Solomon the wisdom to establish the house in Jerusalem, and appeared to Your chosen Apostles, through the incarnation of Your Only-Begotten Son, our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and asked them to build You churches named after Your saints and martyrs.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The Consecration rite

We ask and beseech You, O Gracious God and Lover of mankind, to send Your Holy Spirit upon this Icon of... the Theotokos... (or the name of saint or martyr whom the Icon represents), that it becomes a source of salvation and firmness, that this saint may ask God for the remission of sins for those who approach this Icon in faith for blessed is Your Holy Name and ever-glorified....

The Icon is anointed thrice by Chrism, while the priest entreats God saying:

“Sanctify this Icon in the Name of... for the altar of the church of... (the name of the city). In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit One God, Amen”.

Evidently, the Coptic rite relates the Icon to both the altar and the church; or the people, as if the various saints, represented in their Icons, become involved in the worship of God’s children, their repentance and life, an involvement resulting in a mutual love and appreciation to the effectiveness of the prayers of their triumphant brothers.

Anba Youssab El-Abbah discusses the subject if the consecrated church - Icon and its effectiveness in the life of the church. He says:

“You probably say: How can we worship colours? and how can we convince ourselves with such a concept? !...

The rite of consecration is conducted, not by a priest but by a chief priest. He anoints the consecrated item; the sacred

vessels, Altar, Icons with Chrism which is the likeness of the Holy Spirit.

Although the church canons permit the deacon to hold the chalice and give the Holy Communion to the believers, it forbids him to use, or even come near the Chrism, for he is not given the power to give the Holy Spirit to others.

It is the thoughtful realisation of our canons which were formulated under the guidance of the Spirit of God, that no veneration is made payable to the altar, vessels or Icons prior to their consecration by the chief priest.

The consecration procedure is carried out as follows: The Icon is placed upon the Altar during the Eucharistic service and is anointed with Chrism after praying upon it. When Communion is completed, the archpriest blows at it thrice and says:

“Receive the Spirit.....”

Perhaps you protest and say: How can the Holy Spirit dwell in a painting? !

I can assure you that if you do not believe that the Holy Spirit is received by Chrism and the Bishop’s blow, then all our faith is shaky. The spirit will no longer dwell in the altar, the oblations nor the church, and our worship before the Sanctuary is not worthwhile; God forbid! Hear what the Holy Gospel says: “Therefore, when a man swears by the altar he is swearing by that and by everything on it. And when a man swears by the Temple he is swearing by that and by the One who dwells in it”. (Mt. 23: 20, 21).

Tell me, who dwells in the sanctuary but the Spirit of God.

Perhaps you would further inquire: To whom do I pay my worship? Is it to the Spirit of God residing in the picture or to the saint or martyr whom the image represents?

I say, worship is due to God's Spirit alone, but we owe the relevant saints every reverence and honour, asking for their prayers and intercession before God.

## V    ICONS OF CHRIST

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A question which must have occurred to most of us is: When were the Icons of Christ first introduced? The following, probably, is a realistic answer which is quoted by some scholars.

Church tradition traces the first Icons back to the lifetime of the Saviour Himself and the period immediately after Him. As is well-known, the art of portraiture was at that time flourishing in the Roman Empire. Portraits were made of relatives and of distinguished people. Therefore there are no grounds for supposing that Christians, especially those of pagan origin, were an exception to the general rule, all the more so, since even in Judaism which adhered to the Old Testament prohibition of images, there existed at that time currents of opinion which accepted human images<sup>(1)</sup>.

In the history of the church by Eusebius we find, for instance, the following phrase, 'I have seen a great many portraits of the Saviour, of Peter and of Paul, which have been preserved up to our times<sup>(2)</sup>. Before this passage, Eusebius describes in detail, a statue of the Saviour he had seen in the city of Peneas in Palestine, erected by the woman with an issue of blood who was healed by the Saviour (Mt. 20:23; Mk. 24:34; Lk. 43:48).

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<sup>(1)</sup> See E.L. Sukenik: Ancient. Synag. In Palestine & Greece 1930, p.27.

<sup>(2)</sup> H.E. 7:18 PG 20:680.

Eusebius' testimony is all the more valuable since he was personally very antagonistic to Icons. Consequently his reference to the portraits he had seen, is accompanied by the disapproving comment that it is a pagan custom. <sup>(1)</sup>

## **STORIES ABOUT ICONS OF CHRIST**

In Addition to the statue of Christ which is quoted by Eusebius, there are a number of stories related to the Icons of Christ which date back to the lifetime of the Saviour. We list some of them:

**1.** The famous story of Abgar V, the Black (Ukkoma or Uckoma) king of Edessa.<sup>(2)</sup> It is said that Abgar dispatched an embassy to Sabinus, the Roman governor of Elutheropolis in Palestine on their way passing through Jerusalem, they learned about a new prophet who healed the sick. At once they conceived the idea that it might be possible for that prophet to heal their leprosy stricken king, to whom they conveyed the good tidings. As it was not feasible for the king to visit Jerusalem, he sent a special envoy to Christ with a letter, in which he declared his faith in Him, asking Him to visit his beautiful little country and heal him if He would. One of the messengers was a painter, called Ananias, he tried to take a portrait of Christ but failed due to the splendour of His

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<sup>(1)</sup> Leorid Ouspensky, p. 27.

<sup>(2)</sup> Aziz Atia: A History of Eastern Christianity, p.243,244 Eusib. H. E. 1:13. - John Damasc.: Expos. of Orthod. Faith 4:16. - Evagrius: Illust. 4:37.

countenance. In sympathy with him, the Lord, there upon, washed His face and miraculously stamped His features upon the linen cloth with which He wiped His face.

According to Evagrius this picture saved Edessa when it was besieged by Chosroes (540 AD).

Later, it fell into the Arab's hands when they conquered Edessa and exchanged it for a heavy ransom from the Byzantine Emperor. A Christian Arab writer, Abu-Nasr Yehya, claims that he saw the portrait in St. Sophia in 1058 AD<sup>(1)</sup>.

2. It is worth legend of St. Veronica who used her handkerchief to wipe Christ's face on His way to Golgotha. The Lord rewarded her copying His face miraculously in the cloth.



3. There are some Icons of St. Mary and the Child Jesus that are said to be directly drawn by St. Luke the Evangelist who was doctor as well as painter. Copies of these are kept in the Coptic Monasteries of Deir El-Sourian and El-Meherrak.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Graf: Chstliche Arabische, lit 2:259, 260.

## **EARLY CHURCH RESERVE IN PAINTING CHRIST**

In spite of the fact that Christ was the centre of the Christian. Art ever since the early centuries, it is valid to conclude that the Early Church was conservative and cautious towards the portraits of Christ<sup>(1)</sup>. Instead, Christ was originally depicted symbolically through events of both the Old and New Testaments and His Icons gradually spread after that.

We can sympathise with the views of the Early Church which were based on the following grounds:

1. The majority of the Early Fathers were always suspicious of all facets of arts as a possible means of returning to paganism.
2. Due to the fact that the pagan world of that time was beauty-oriented, some Fathers were hesitant not only in painting Christ, but also in proclaiming the beauty of His countenance lest it should wrongly be related to the divinity in the minds of the simple. In the light of this background, we can appreciate the philosophy of some Father<sup>(2)</sup> in ignoring the physical features

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(1) Farrar: Christ in Art.

(2) Justin Cum Trypho: "When Jesus came to the Jordan, He was considered to be the son of Joseph, the carpenter, and He appeared without comeliness as the Scriptures declared; and He was deemed a carpenter".

St. Clement of Alexandria: Paed. III: 1; Strom. 3:17. "The Lord Himself was uncomely in aspect as the Spirit testifies by Isaiah". "The Head of the Church passed through the world unlovely in the flesh, and without form, thereby teaching us to look at the unseen and incorporate of the divine Cause".

of the Son of Man and sticking to verses from Isaiah about the Suffering Servant in a literal meaning (Is. 52: 14; 53: 2, 3).

3. The Fathers of the Church often concentrate on the marvels of the Lord's redeeming deed. For example St. Augustine says:<sup>(1)</sup>

“God is beautiful, the World with God (the Father); beautiful in the womb of the Virgin, where He did not lose His divinity and assumed Humanity; beautiful is the Word as a new - born infant, for the angels sang praises, and the star directed the Magi to worship Him in the manger;

beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth;  
beautiful in His scourging;  
beautiful in calling men to life;  
beautiful in not caring for death;  
beautiful in laying down His life,  
beautiful in taking it again,  
beautiful on the Cross, beautiful in the sculpture;  
beautiful in heaven!!!”.

4. Some Fathers felt uneasy in painting the Lord, believing that He probably suffered enough humility in His incarnation.

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Tertullian: Marcion: 3:17; Flesh of Christ 9. “Whatever that poor body may be, because it was an object of touch and sight, it is my Christ!!”  
“It is ( the earthly features ) which obscured Him as the Son of God; for He looked on as a man... His body did not reach even to human beauty, to say nothing of heavenly glory”.

(1) Laundy: monumental Christianity, London 1889, p. 233.

This attitude appears clearly in a speech delivered by Austerius the bishop of Amasea, to the rich Christian ladies. He criticises them in following the example of the pagan woman in wearing gauzy dresses woven in gold thread with patterns showing scenes of the gospel history rather than the pagan legends. He says<sup>(1)</sup>:

“In acting thus, they think that show piety, and clothe themselves in garments acceptable to God. If they accept my advice they, will sell them and pay honour to the living images of Christ.

Paint not Christ on your garments, for the one humility of His incarnation suffices Him, which, for our sake He voluntarily accepted.....”.

**5.** Some Fathers were suspicious that painting Christ would turn the worshippers from thinking of His divinity. We read in a speech of Paulinus, the bishop of Nola.<sup>(2)</sup> The works of our hands do not contain You, O Great Creator, whom the world with its whole substance, does not contain .

**6.** The valid sense of the permanent presence of Christ and the Realisation of this incorporeal, eternal and spiritual nearness made Him definitely closer to the soul than He could have been by His physical presence among His dearest Apostles<sup>(3)</sup> . The people undoubtedly, felt the words of the Apostle Paul, “Yes,

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(1) Asterius of Amasea: hom. 1 de Div. et Laz. PG 11:167.

(2) St. Paulinus: Ep. 32:17.

(3) Farrar: Christ in Art. P.62

though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more". (2 Cor. 5: 16).

**7.** Through awe and intense spirituality, the thoughts of the Early Christians were entirely absorbed in the eternal life. From day to day their eyes were focused on the last advent of the Lord.... as if their joy with the eternal glories had fully occupied them and made them disregard even their everyday needs and arts.

**8.** The Early Christians recognised Christ as the glorified King who rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and sat upon the throne of eternity. Thus, in spite of borrowing our nature during His life, the Lord replaced such a body of humiliation with a body of glory after resurrection; a body which St. Mary the Magdalene failed to recognise and the two Disciples of Emmaus remained unaware of, until breaking the bread<sup>(1)</sup>.

**9.** Lastly, as a result of the successive waves of persecution and demolition which the Early Church had suffered and the insecure environment which surrounded her, the Church could not pay enough attention to Icons in general.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid.

## THE COUNTENANCE OF CHRIST

Despite the claims of a number of Early Fathers like Justine, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria that the Son of Man rejected all earthly beauties including His human countenance, the majority of the Fathers confirm what the Psalmist says about the Lord, “You are the fairest of the sons of men” (45: 2).

For instance, St. Jerome says<sup>(2)</sup>, “The brightness and majesty of His divinity hidden under the veil of His flesh, shed their rays over His human countenance and subdued all who had the joy to gaze upon them”.

The details of the Lord’s looks are given in the famous description attributed to Pablius Lentulus which he sent to his friend Pontius Pilate:

“At that time appeared a man, who is still alive, endowed with mighty powers;

The people call Him a mighty prophet, His name is Jesus Christ. His own disciples call Him the Son of God.

He raises the dead to life and heals the sick of all manner of diseases.

This man is of noble and lofty stature and well proportioned.

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<sup>(2)</sup> St. Jerom: In mat. 1:8.

With a face full of kindness, yet of firmness, which they who look at it, can love and fear.

His hair is waving and crisp, somewhat wine-coloured and glitters as it flows down over His shoulders, with a parting in the middle, after the manner of the Nazarenes.

His brow is smooth and most serene.

His face is spotless and wrinkle free, and glows with a delicate flush.

His nose and mouth are of faultless contour; the beard is full and abundant, of the same colour of His hair, and forked.

His eyes are blue and very brilliant.

None have seen Him laugh, but many saw Him weep.

In rebuke and reproof He is awe-inspiring; in exhortation and instruction He is gentle and persuasive.

His hands and limbs are beautiful to look upon.

He is tall and slender.

In speech He is grave and deliberates;

His language and manner are quiet and simple;

and He is fair among the sons of men”.

A second description of the countenance of the Son of Man is given by Fr. John Damascene and is preserved in Nicephorus<sup>(1)</sup>. He is described as handsome and strikingly tall with fair and with slightly curling locks. His colour was of wheat like His mother, bright eyes, sweet and sonorous voice and looks revealing patience, nobleness and wisdom.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Nicep. H.E. 1:40.

## VI ICONS OF SAINTS

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When the period of the severe Roman persecutions against the church passed, and Christianity became the main religion, Icons of martyrs and saints became widely spread. This showed that church life continues throughout all ages and that saints are still living and working for the church through their continuous prayers.

Fr. John Damascene clearly observed this wonderful effect upon the church in his testament. ... “The saints, in their life- time, were filled with the Holy Spirit and when they are no more, His grace abides with their spirits and with their bodies in their tombs, and also with their likeness and sacred icons, not by nature but by grace and divine power...”<sup>(1)</sup> .

You can really appreciate this when you stand before the relics of these saints or their consecrated icons!

The Holy Bible states that even the bones of Elisha had raised a dead body, not by the virtue of their material as bones, but because of God’s action through them. Also, the shadow of St. Peter the Apostle healed the sick, and the handkerchief and cloth of St. Paul exorcised from evil spirits. These are examples of God’s continuous action through His holy saints, even after their departure.

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<sup>(1)</sup> PG.94:1249 c d. 1890, vol. 1

## **IS THERE A NEED FOR THE ICONS OF SAINTS?**

Fr. John Damascene replies, “The adversary says, make an image of Christ or His mother who bore Him, and let that be sufficient”.

Oh, what folly this is! In this way, you are absolutely against the saints. If you make an image of Christ and not of the saints, it is evident that you do not disown images but you consider of the saints to be unworthy of honour... “I live” says the Lord, “And I will glorify those who glorify Me”. And the divine Apostle, says: “Therefore now he is not a servant, but a son, and if a son, an heir also through God”. Again “If we suffer with Him, that we also may be glorified”.

You are not waging war against images, but against the saints. St. John, who rested on His breast, says that we shall be likened to Him: just as a man by contact with fire becomes fire, not by nature, but by contact, by burning by participation....

“God”, the Scripture says, “Stood in the Synagogue of the gods, considering the saints too to be gods. Holy Gregory explains by saying “God stands in the midst of the gods” means that He acknowledges their several merits. The saints, in their lifetime, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and when they are no more, His grace abides with their spirits and with their bodies in their tombs, and also with their likeness and sacred icons, not by nature but by grace and divine power....”.

“We depict Christ as our King and Lord, and do not deprive Him of His army. The saints constitute the Lord’s army... For if the saints are heirs of God, and co-heirs of Christ, they will be also partakers of the divine glory of sovereignty. If the friends of God have had a part in the sufferings of Christ, how shall they not receive a share of His Glory even on earth? “I call you not servants”, our Lord says, “You are my friends”. Shall we then deprive them of the honour given to them by the church!....

I worship the image of Christ as the Incarnate God, that of our Lady, the Mother of us all, as the Mother of God’s Son; that of the saints as the friends of God. They have withstood sin unto blood, and followed Christ in shedding their blood for Him, who shed His blood for them!

## **ICONS OF THE FOUR EVANGELISTS**

The four Evangelists are the true witnesses and interpreters of Christ’s life and His saving deed. On this account, the Evangelists’ Icons and symbols were introduced in early Christian places of worship. Often they are depicted around the Throned Christ in the eastern niche of the church, sometimes in the four corners of the principal dome of the Nave or in the corners of the sanctuary dome; as they represent the four majestic pillars upon which the Lord’s kingdom is established.

The Holy Fathers found a close relationship between those Evangelists and the “Four Living Creatures” (Ezk. 1: 5).

St. Mark is likened to the Living Creature who has the shape of a lion, St. Matthew the Human One, St. Luke the Ox, and St. John the Eagle<sup>(1)</sup>. For this reason the Evangelists are depicted together with their symbols or with the Living Creatures.

## **ICONS OF THE DISCIPLES**

The earliest representations of the twelve disciples appeared as emblems in the ancient churches of Rome. They were pictured as twelve sheep, with Christ in the Middle, as the Good Shepherd bearing a lamb in His arms. More frequently, Christ was depicted as “the lamb of God”, raised and crowned with a cruciform nimbus, and the disciples arranged on each side as sheep, (See page 321).

## **ICONS OF SAINTS AND SYMBOLS**

It is noteworthy that, since the sixth century, the western church, has usually distinguished each disciple, saint, or martyr, by a particular emblem, depicting some aspect of his life or death.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Fr. T.Y. Malaty - The Book of Revelation of John the Evangelist

## THE NIMBUS

The Nimbus of glory or the Halo became a characteristic feature of the Icons of Christ, His saints and angels. In fact, this idea originated from a pagan practice, where pagan gods were decorated with crowns of rays or stars. Later, this idea appealed to Roman Emperors who assumed the honours due to divinity and appeared in public crowned with golden radii. The colossal statue of Nero wearing a circle of rays, imitating the glory of the sun, is a good example. This ornament became customary, not only to Roman Caesars, but Christian Emperors also adopted the same divine insignia<sup>(1)</sup>.

The use of Nimbuses around the heads of saints and angels reveals their nature as the “light of the World”, Icons of Christ, on the other hand, are further distinguished by a cross inside the Nimbus together with His monogram, or the alpha and omega letters, written on it as a sign of the Lord’s Divinity.

The following are some points which characterise the Coptic Nimbuses:

1. Contrary to the western church customs Nimbuses are never used around the head of any living person.
2. Only circular Nimbuses are found in Coptic icons. Other shapes such as the triangular, quatrefoil, or the pate are not used.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Jameson: Sacred & Legendary Art, London 1890, voll, p. 133.

3. In Addition to circular Nimbuses around the head, Copts knew also the aureole surrounding the entire body of Christ as a sign of His Divinity. These are found in Icons of Deir (Monastery) of Bawit and are dated back to the sixth century.

4. The Nimbus in the Coptic church does not refer to power, but is a sign of divinity, holiness, and beauty. Consequently, you never see it displayed around the head of Satan, as in some Greek, Saxon and French pictures<sup>(1)</sup>.



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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid

## VII ICONS OF HEAVENLY CREATURES

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“Hail to the Church, House of Angels”.

Doxology of Morning Prayer.

The church, as defined by a Coptic homily is:

“A place of consolation,  
a place of meeting of angels  
and a place of the Cherubim and the Serafim”<sup>(1)</sup>

It is also said that St. Pachomius of Egypt saw the church full of angels<sup>(2)</sup> .

No doubt, then, that Coptic prayers, hymns, dogmas, history and traditions are all centred around the mystical meeting between the believers and God, Who is not isolated from His celestial creatures.

Origen gives an explanation to this church doctrine by saying<sup>(3)</sup> , “If the angel of the Lord encamps beside those who fear God and brings them deliverance (Ps. 33: 8) ... it would seem that when a number of people duly meeting together for the glory of Christ, they will have each his own angel, encamped beside him, since they all fear the Lord. Each angel will be with the man he has been commissioned to guard and to

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid., p. 32, 23.

<sup>(2)</sup> Quasten: Patrology

<sup>(3)</sup> Danielou: Origen

direct. Thus when the saints assemble, there will be two churches, one of men and one of angels”.

In view of such an understanding, Coptic architecture in general, and art in particular, gives a true representation of the heavenly image. We totally ignore anything to do with hell or Satan, apart from every rare Icons which represent the devil as a dragon or a serpent defeated by an angel or a saint.

## **1. ANGELS AND THE HOLY BIBLE**

The Holy Scripture describe the heavenly hosts as ministers of God who are closely associated with men. They are “sent forth to minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1: 14) Longing for the eternal wedding of the church.

Their love towards men was misunderstood by some Jewish interpreters. They thought that angels were only a divine manifestation , ie. a visible form of divinity so that we can acknowledge God likewise, some Gnostics believed that angels created the world. On this account, God forbade the Jews from portraying angels or any other heavenly creatures, except at direct instructions from Him.

The situation has changed now, because, as Christians, we have become able to distinguish between worshipping God and venerating His angels. We portray them on Icons of Christ, Icons of scriptural events, Icons of saints, as well as Icons of their own, as we shall cover below in some detail.

## 2. ANGELS AND ICONS OF CHRIST

Heavenly hosts are always correlated with the Lord's glory. Upon looking at the Throned Lord, Isaiah saw the six-winged Seraphim, and Ezekial saw the full eyed Cherubim, while John the Disciple saw choirs of angels praising Him!

Moreover, when the Lord appeared to Abbot Abraham, tow angels accompanied Him. They were sent to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18).

No wonder, then, that God instructed His people of the Old Testament to fix two Cherubim above the Ark of Testament, which represented the Divine Presence.

Based on these Biblical facts, Christian Iconographers seldom produce Icons of the Throned Lord without some representation of celestial hosts. One good example of this is the Icon of the Throned Christ fitted on the Eastern niche of Deir-Bawit at upper-Egypt, which dates back to the sixth century. It shows the Four Living Creatures with their wheel surrounding the Lord, as revealed by prophet Ezekial (see page 325).

The picture on page 335 is another example found in a Seidic Coptic manuscript of the Sinaxarium. It shows two angels stretching their wings to cover the Child Jesus in His mother's bosom. These is a similar scene of the Old Ark of Testimony, when the Manna (Christ) was present.

### **3. ANGELS AND SCRIPTURAL EVENTS**

In the Old Testament, angels were involved in a number of missions for prophets and believers as a part of God's plan for our salvation. These missions have increased considerably in the New Testament so that you rarely find an important event of Salvation without angels taking part in it. That has been reflected on Iconography portraying events of salvation, such as those of Annunciation (Luke 1: 26), the Lord's Nativity (Luke 2: 8-15), the Temptation (Mt. 4: 11), Christ's Agony in the Garden (Luke 22: 43), His Resurrection (Mt. 28: 2), Ascension (Acts 1) and the last advent (Mt. 13: 4).

Sometimes angels are portrayed in Scriptural events which do not clearly states their presence, such as the Icons of Epiphany (Page 408), and Entering Jerusalem. Here, the church confirms the words of the Apostle that angels ministry never ends and it reveals their joy for our salvation.

### **4. ANGELS & ICONS OF SAINTS**

There are cases where angels appear holding crowns on top of saints' heads. These indicate the accessibility to heaven of believers and the resemblance between saints and angels.

### **5. ICONS OF HEAVENLY BEINGS**

These represent a number of heavenly creatures, in particular, those who were mentioned in the Holy Bible, such as Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.

## VIII ICONS THROUGH THE AGES

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### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICONOGRAPHY

The history of Icons may be divided into three periods or stages. Each stage overlaps the others. These give an idea about the development of thought concerning Church Iconography.

#### 1. PERIOD OF SYMBOLS

Symbols were used on a large scale in the first two centuries, where Christ was represented as the Good Shepherd, the Fish; or was hidden under His monogram, that is the first two Greek letters of His Name ( **XRISTOS** ), in the shape of a Cross.



## **2. PERIOD OF BIBLICAL ICONS**

The Early Church used Icons that represented subjects of the Holy Scriptures for the purpose of edification. As Christianity spread throughout the whole world at that time, Christians on their journeys encountered churches in other countries which used different languages; Icons were a universal language which every Christian could read.

The catacombs of Alexandria contained this type of Icons, as the painting of the miracle at Ana and the miracle of the loaves united in one design<sup>(1)</sup> .

The ceiling of one of the chambers of the catacomb of St. Callosities has a picture of the Lord in the shape of Orpheus, surrounded by eight panels containing scriptural subjects, such as the striking of the rock, Daniel among the lions, the raising of Lazarus, David with the sling and so on.

## **3. PERIOD OF ESCHATOLOGICAL ICONS**

In the fourth century, as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, many philosophers were converted, and peace spread throughout the church. However, two contradictory attitudes appeared:

**A.** Some churchmen, especially bishops deviated from their own spiritual messages, taking an interest in their own glory, as the palace of the Emperor was opened to them.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Cutts: p. 185.

**B.** Others felt that the Church which had conquered paganism needed to await the eternal conquest, which is the Parousia (last advent) of the Lord. This attitude had its effect upon thousands of Egyptian believers who practised the monastic life, that is the angelic life, waiting for their heavenly bridegroom. Church worship and Church Icons also of this period, bore a strong eschatological attitude, for the following kinds of Icons appeared:

- I.** Icons of Martyrs and Saints crowned with glory.
- II.** Icons of Angels.
- III.** Icons of prophetic visions: In Deir Bawit in Upper-Egypt (6th century) one of these icons was found, which represents the Lord portrayed according to the vision of Ezekiel as the axles and wheels of the chariot of victory appeared<sup>(1)</sup>.
- IV.** Icons of the Throned Christ, as a sign of the church longing to participate in His glory. This representation is found in Deir Bawit, in which the Four Living Creatures portrayed bearing the Throned Christ with angels around Him.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Grabar: Christian Iconography, London 1969

# **HISTORY OF ICONS**

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As Church Iconography had been discussed, now I expose its history, in more details.

## **1. THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES**

We have already mentioned that symbolism was the most common type of Icons used in the first two centuries. At this point I would like to state that besides these symbols Icons of Christ, His Mother, and His Disciples, Icons representing events of the Holy Scripture... were also in existence in this period.

## **THE Gnostics & Early Theologians**

The Gnostics of the second century were known by their progress in artistic expressions. St. Irenaeus state that they possessed colourful paintings and that they were adamant that their portraits of Christ were authentic.

The exaggerated in venerating these images in a pagan atmosphere, as they crowned them, and came close to the images to the well-known philosophers<sup>(1)</sup>, thus creating confusion in Christian worship. Tyrwhitt in his book “Art Teaching of the Primitive Church”, states, “The Gnostics

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Irenaeus: AD. Haer. 1:24, 25.

express wrong and false ideas by their pictures, for sometimes human and animal figures appeared in themselves idolatrous”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The theologians of the first three centuries speak violently against every artistic expression, as a natural reaction to the Gnostic attitude, fearing return to Paganism. They felt there was no time to speak of art and beauty.

Tertullian, as an example, wrote bitterly against Hermogenes, a Christian painter, whom he accused of working for pagan patrons and he did not view with much favour the painting of sacred figures on vessels of glass<sup>(2)</sup>. However, we need to mention that Tertullian himself speaks in more detail about on painting the Good Shepherd on the sacred chalice<sup>(3)</sup>, and signing the Cross as a pious custom which the believer practises each day, as a sign of his fellowship with the Crucified One.

St. Clement of Alexandria also by a similar dread of pagan influences, calls the Art ‘deceitful’<sup>(4)</sup>, asking Christians to be careful in using current symbols.

Origen, the broad-minded churchman, had fear of pagan art which quenched most of his sympathy for art which he might have naturally left.

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(1) Tyrwhitt, p.13

(2) Tertullian: De Pudicitia 7.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Clem Alex. : Protrepticon 1 : 62

## **2. THE FOURTH CENTURY**

The Fathers of the fourth century speak of using Icons as an established custom, they mentioned Icons filling the whole church, praising their effect on believers' spiritual life.

Icons and statues attracted Christian Emperors and rulers. Eusebius, who was an iconoclast, tells us that Constantine ordered that a statue be made of the Cross, and in 312 AD he placed it next to his own statue. He also relates that Constantine made an image of the Good Shepherd and another one representing the holy passions, inlaid with precious stones, which he set in his private room<sup>(1)</sup>.

### **ICONS & FATHERS OF THE FOURTH CENTURY**

St. Paulinus of Nola, at first refused using Icons, as he says<sup>(2)</sup>. "The work of our hands does not contain You, O Great Creator, whom the world with its whole substance does not contain You!". Afterwards, St. Paulinus himself acknowledges the advantage of Icons in church life, adorned his new Church of St. Felix, the old basilica of the town and the Church of Funde, with scriptural histories and with symbolic pictures of the Holy Trinity. Among the subjects in the first church were 'the creation, the offering of Isaac, the continence of Joseph, the overthrow of Pharaoh and the separation of Ruth and Orpha'. In the second church he introduced representations

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<sup>(1)</sup> Eusebius: H.E. 9:9; Vita Constantine 3:49.

<sup>(2)</sup> St. Paulinus of Nola : Epistle 32:17.

from the two Testaments. In the apse of the third church he placed the symbol of the passion in the form of a white Lamb crowned beneath a red Cross.

St. Basil the Great, in a rhetorical homily on the martyrdom of Barlaam says,<sup>(1)</sup> “Arise now before me, you iconographers of the saint merits..... Let me be conquered by your pictures of the valiant deeds of the martyr!.... Let me look at this fighter most vividly depicted in your image!.... Let also the Instigator of the fight, Christ, be presented in your pictures!”.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, similarly describes the pictures that represent the martyrdom of Theodosius, which seem to have been painted on the walls of the church which contained the saint’s relics. “The artist”, he says, “had depicted in glowing colours the heroic acts of the martyr, his struggles, his sufferings and his steadfastness as a soldier of Christ”. “A painting”, he adds, “though silent, can speak upon the wall and is of great benefit”.

He also tells us how he was affected by the Icons of the offering of Isaac, saying, “Often have I seen the paintings which represent the sacrifice of Isaac, and I could not contemplate it without tears, so truthfully did artist present the scene<sup>(2)</sup>”.

We are also told that St. John Chrysostom had an icon of St. Paul in front of him, when, wakeful at night, he studied St. Paul’s epistles, and it is described how, when he looked up

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(1) PG 31:489 a, C.

(2) PG 94:1269 C. De Fil et Sp. Sanct. Vol. 3, p. 572.

from the written text, the picture seemed to come to life and speak to him<sup>(1)</sup> .

On the contrary, St. Epiphanius as one of the iconoclasts of this century, on his going through Anablatha, a village in Palestine, found there a veil hanging before the door of the church, whereon was painted an image of Christ or some saint which he rent and advised that it should be used as a window-sheet for some poor man<sup>(2)</sup> .

## **THE COUNCIL OF ILLIBERIS (ELVIRA)**

One of the canons of the Council of Elvira (Grenada) in Spain about 301 AD declares, “Pictures ought not to be placed in churches, nor that which we worship or adore to be painted on the walls”. This canon does not imply that walls and ceilings of churches before that time were not painted, but on the contrary it declares indirectly the opposite.

Someone sees that this canon does not provide sufficient basis for interpretation in an iconoclastic sense. The Fathers, of the council are speaking only of images on walls, because it was held shortly before the persecution of Diocletian, which was already foreseen by those Fathers and others; therefore this text

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<sup>(1)</sup> Evan E. : Images, London 1940, p. 118 - John Damascene: Oration 1, PG. 94:1277c.

<sup>(2)</sup> Epiphan. : Epist. A.D. Joan. Hierasol

was interpreted as a desire to protect the sacred Icons from outrage<sup>(1)</sup> .

### **3. THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES**

St. Augustine bears witness to the custom of painting Christ and His Apostles on the church walls in his time<sup>(2)</sup> .

He praises the art of painting as an action assisted by the divine grace, as he says<sup>(3)</sup>, “The beautiful things transmitted through the souls of artists to their hands, come from that Beauty which is above all souls, that Beauty for which my soul sighs day and night”. He also praises icons of the sacrifice of Isaac which was spread in churches, but at the same time he attacks those who misused the Icons .

In the sixth century Austerius of Amasea gives us many details of the Icons in his times. In one of his homilies on Ophemia the Martyr, he describes in detail her Icon, praises it, and compares it with the acts of the famous contemporary painters. The (second) Council of Nicea on 787 used his homily as a strong proof of venerating Icons<sup>(4)</sup> .

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(1) Leorid Ouspensky: The Meaning of Icons, p. 27. - Hefele: Histoire des Conciles, Paris 1907, vol 1, p. 204.

(2) De Consenu Evang. ixn 16

(3) St. Augustine: Confession 10:34

(4) The Coptic Church and all the Non-Chalcedonian Churches did not participate in its acts.

In the same century Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, ordered that all images of the churches of his diocese had to be broken, because of the exaggeration of someone in venerating Icons; but Pope Gregory writes to him condemning the behaviour as we have already mentioned.

#### **4. THE SEVENTH CENTURY**

There is an interesting note on painting in the Early English Church by the historian Bede, who relates that when Benedict Bishop returned from his third voyage to Rome in 675 AD, “he brought with him pictures of a sacred representations to adorn the Church of St. Peter which he had built at Monkwearmouth with which he intended to adorn the central nave on wood placed from one wall to other; also some figures from gospel history to adorn the south wall; others from Revelation of St. John for the north wall; so that every one who entered the Church even if they could not read, would see wherever they looked the loving countenance of Christ and His Saints, though it were but in a picture, and with watchful minds might meditate upon the benefits of the Lord’s Incarnations and having before their eyes the perils of the last judgement, might examine their hearts more strictly on that account”.

On his fifth journey, about 685 AD, Benedict brought back for the church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the Monastery of Wearmouth, enough pictures of the divine history, to go around the Church. For the Church of St. Paul at Jarrow, he brought pictures arranged in type and anti-type, viz, one pair of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice, and of our

Lord carrying His Cross; another pair of the brazen serpent and our Lord on the Cross<sup>(1)</sup> .

## **5. THE ICONOCLASTIC MOVEMENT**

The Greek word “eikonoklavtev” means “image bearer”, a name given to the powerful party which set itself against the use of Holy Icons, and created disturbances in the Byzantine church during the eighth and the first half of the ninth century<sup>(2)</sup> . This movement had its effect on the Western Church, but had no effect on the Church of Alexandria which stopped all relations with Byzantium (Constantinople) and Rome after the Arab’s Conquest of Egypt.

### **A. FIRST STAGE OF CONTROVERSY 726 - 775**

Undoubtedly the misuse of images came to a climax, as we read of people who chose some special icon to be the Godfather of their child instead of a living believer, or who ground an image or a letter into powder, mixed this with water and drank it as medicine<sup>(3)</sup> ; it is not difficult to understand that a reaction would come<sup>(4)</sup> . Some bishop began to attack the use of images, asking for the help of the Byzantine Emperor, Leo III. They advised him that using images caused a scandal

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(1) Cutts, p. 167, 168.

(2) Hallett: A Catholic Dict., p. 419, 420

(3) So the letter of Michael II to Luvio the Pious

(4) Hastings : Encyclopedia of Religion & Ethics, vol I, p.78.

to the Jews and Moslems, so he was asked to issue an edict, commanding all icons to be destroyed. Germanius the Patriarch of Constantinople explained the advantage of using icons to the Emperor who did not listen, but on the contrary published an edict in 726 AD to destroy church icons. The soldiers began to carry out the Imperial order and there were disturbances throughout the Empire. The destruction of the famous image of Christ over the bronze door of the palace, led to an uproar amongst the people.

Our historian Isidorus related the story of destroying the large Cross which was fixed on the door of the Imperial palace by Constantine. One of the captains brought an axe to strike the Cross. Some women saw him and begged him not to do this, but he refused their demand and struck the head with his axe. The women pulled the ladder on which the captain was standing. He fell down lifeless. The Emperor on hearing what happened, condemned them to death<sup>(1)</sup>.

Germanius, the patriarch of Constantinople protested against the edict and appealed to Pope Gregory II in 728 AD, where upon the Emperor declared him a traitor, deposed of him, and set up an Iconoclast, Anastasius, in his place (730 AD).

The Emperor wrote to the Pope, commanding him to accept the new edict, destroy his images and summoning a council to forbid their use. In 727 Pope Gregory answered to this by a long defence of images. He also blamed the emperor's

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<sup>(1)</sup> Anba Isidorus - El Khardala -1964, vol 2 p 186

interference in Church affairs, denied the need of a council and demanded that Leo should give up his policy in this matter.

The Emperor threatened to destroy St. Peter's image at Rome and to take the Pope captive. Fresh acts of violence against the defenders of images occurred. Monasteries were destroyed, monks - as being the chief defenders of images were banished, tortured and put to death.

It is said that a monk called Stephen from Necomedia was brought in front of the Emperor, who began to mock him saying: "Do you not see, O ignorant monk, that any person can put his feet upon the image of Jesus Christ without dishonouring His essence?" The Monk then threw a coin on the ground, on which the Emperor's image was printed and said to him, "Then I can put my feet on this picture without dishonouring you!" Then the persons who were present rebuked the monk and seized him to be condemned to death accused of the crime of despising the image of the Emperor<sup>(1)</sup>.

During this period, Father John Damascene published his three apologies against the iconoclasts<sup>(2)</sup>. In the West the people rose against the Emperor's edict.

In 731 AD Pope Gregory II was succeeded by Gregory III, who immediately held a council of ninety-three bishops at Rome, ex-communicating Anyone who defiled or destroyed the Icons. The legate sent to Constantinople with a copy of this decree was stopped and imprisoned in Sicily. The Emperor

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<sup>(1)</sup> Anba Isidorus - El Khardala -1964, vol 2 p 186

<sup>(2)</sup> PG. 94:1231 - 1420.

then sent a fleet to Italy to punish the Pope, however, it was wrecked on the way in a storm. The Emperor then withdrew some parished from the See of Rome and joined them to the See of Constantinople.

In 742 Leo was succeeded by his son Constantine V (Coprnomos), who continued his father's policy. In 754 AD he convoked a council of 338 bishops, which anathematised those who venerated Icons; and it was the excuse for Additional severity.

Relics of saints were thrown into the sea, many monks were killed, monasteries were destroyed and turned into barracks. Monastic life was forbidden and the Patriarch denounced his former state as a monk.

## **B. SECOND STAGE OF CONTROVERSY**

Under the reign of Leon IV (775 - 780), the persecution abated, though it did not cease. On his death, his wife Empress Irene, held the regency for her child Constantine. She set herself to restore the veneration of Icons and was supported by Tarsius, the new Patriarch. She also renewed relations with Rome. In 787 AD a council assembled at Nicea. Its decrees were signed by at least 308 bishops or proxies for bishops. It declared the lawful use of Icons and defended this by texts showing that there were images in the Temple (Exo. 25: 18-22; Num. 7: 8; Ezk. 41: 18 etc.), and by quotations from the Fathers. It also declared that the Holy Icons were to receive veneration and not adoration, and that the honour paid to them is only relative, and is given for the sake of their prototypes.

Although the decrees of the council were officially received, Iconoclasm retained strong followers especially in the army<sup>(1)</sup>. In 814 AD Iconoclasm broke out again in the time of Leo V, who was a captain, elected by the army as an Emperor. Icons of churches were broken again. Niciphoras, the Patriarch was deposed in the year 815 and many bishops, priests, monks and laymen were banished, tortured or killed.

After Leo's assassination in 820, his successor, Michael II continued his Iconoclastic policy, but in a milder form.

In 829 AD his son Theophilus repeated the same story of Iconoclasm.

In 842 AD Theophilus died and the Empress, Theodora became the regent for her son Michael III. She immediately put an end to Iconoclasm for she deposed the Patriarch John VII and put Methodios in his place. He opened the prisons and released the Icon-defenders and in 842 AD a council renewed the decrees of Nicea II and excommunicated all the Iconoclasts. On the first Sunday of the great Lent (19th February 842 AD) Icons were brought back in triumph; in a great procession to the churches, and this is still anniversary, kept to this day by the Greek as the Feast of Orthodoxy (on the first Sunday of Lent).

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<sup>(1)</sup> Oxford Dictionary of the Christian church. p. 687.

## **C. THE CONTROVERSY IN THE WEST**

The controversy mentioned above had its echo also in the West, especially in the Frankish Kingdom, the cause being two incidents of misunderstanding.

**I.** Pope Hadrian sent an inaccurate translation of the acts of the council of Nicea II to Charlemagne and the latter misunderstood it.

**II.** Furthermore, the Franks did not understand Byzantine etiquette. The Byzantines prostrated themselves before the Emperor, incensed him and kissed his feet; they even gave these marks of respect for his portraits. Naturally the same was given to the Icons; but the Franks misunderstood these practices thinking them idolatrous.

The Franks protested against the message of Pope Hadrian and sent to him what is called “*Libri Coroline*”, in which they rejected the two councils of the Iconoclasts at Constantinople and that of Icon defenders at Nicea. They declared that God alone is to be adored and worshipped, while the saints are only to be venerated, and images may lawfully be used in churches, but their use is by no means necessary, and it is foolish to burn incense or lights before them.

In 794 AD a council was held at Frankfort in the presence of two legates or the Pope, who could not discover the misunderstanding, and thus the council condemned the council of Nicea, declaring that Icons are not to be adored by the same worship given to the Holy Trinity.

## IX ICONS AND ART

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Iconography undoubtedly is a branch of art, subject to its rule and development. The church makes a distinction between the Icons of the church and normal paintings. She demands her artists to give special consideration to the following ecclesiastic realities:

1. The Christian artist is a preacher and a teacher. His art is ministerial, for he does not merely offer art, but revelations and prophecies... he offers spirit and life<sup>(1)</sup>.

In his Icons, he must not merely express his own response and his own observation of the subject, but reflects his inner evangelical feelings which he practises, his apostolic mind and authentic patristic attitudes.

He needs not only to have natural artistic abilities, but to study the principles of art and its development, to have a knowledge of the Bible, the church traditions, and teachings, and also to practise the evangelical, ecclesiastical and patristic spirit.

He also needs to have Divine grace to guide him during his work, so that he may produce blessed and Holy Icons, which will have the power to attract the soul to fellowship with God.

We need to see that Christian Iconographer fasts and prays whilst doing his work so that his Icons will bear a pious spirit.

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<sup>(1)</sup> K. Mc Vinton.

2. Iconography is called “liturgical art”, for through it the believer tastes the essence of the liturgy. His feelings will not be of a carnal nature, but will surpass this world, and there will have a longing for heavenly worship and understanding of future life<sup>(1)</sup>.

The spiritual Icon-maker uses elements from this world to express “what surpasses sense”, he transmutes them from what is carnal into what is spiritual, just as faith transmutes man’s feelings, from carnal into spiritual.

“I saw”, says St. John the Ladder, “Some men given over with passion to carnal love, and when they received the light and took the way of Christ, the fierce carnal passion was changed inside them, through divine grace, into a great love for the Lord”.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Photios Kontoghu: What Orthodox Iconography Is. P. 1, 2.

## X COPTIC ICONS

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### ARTS AND THE COPTS

Art has been correlated with religion from the beginning of history, so that a strong belief had arisen that arts such as, painting, engraving, music, songs, dancing etc., have come into existence as a result of religious beliefs.

In Early Christian times, Eastern societies, especially the Egyptian one, were very religious, so that many thousands preferred to live in the wilderness longing for the Angelic life, when those who remained in the cities and countries were occupied by religious discussions.

St. Gregory the Nazianzus explained this state by saying that if you went into a shop to buy a loaf of bread, “the baker, instead of telling you the price, would argue that the Father is greater than the Son. The money-changer would talk about the Begotten and the non begotten, instead of giving you your money, and if you wanted a bath, the bath-keeper assured you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing”<sup>(1)</sup>.

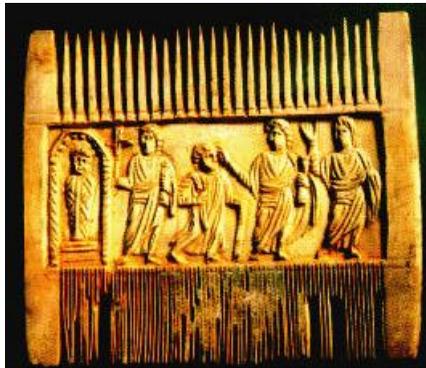
It is evident from the above how the Christian faith penetrated into the Copts’ daily lives, even in their eating, drinking, literature and arts. There is evidence that Christian

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<sup>(1)</sup> Christopher Dawson: The Making Of Europe, London 1939, p. 108-111.

symbols and images were inscribed on their rings, painted on their walls, doors, cups, plates, chairs etc....

For instance, in the Coptic Museum at Cairo, there is a Coptic ivory comb from the fifth century. On one side, Lazarus appears in the shape of an Egyptian mummy while Christ, bearing a cross instead of a wand, appears on the other side. Besides it, there is another representation of the “Healing the Blind man”. On the other side of the comb, there is a mounted Coptic Saint enclosed irrationally within a wreath supported by angels.



## THE COPTIC ART

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No art has been subject to so much dispute as the Coptic Art.

The archaeologist Strzugowski<sup>(1)</sup> hypothesises that it is just a local continuation of the Hellenistic art. Maspero and Gaet look on the Coptic Art as an offshoot of the Byzantine Art, and Elbera knew it as an authentic national Egyptian art.....

This confusion is a natural result of many factors, as follows:

1. Egyptian soil was ruled successively by the Greeks, Romans, the Byzantines etc..., who had cultures and arts of their own. These rulers had their own districts inside the great cities of Egypt, where they left monuments, which are now mixed with the national ones<sup>(2)</sup>.

2. The present Coptic monuments, however many they are, do not represent the true quality of the Coptic Art, for the most prized and valuable pieces were ruined in unceasing waves of persecution<sup>(3)</sup>, as the Arabic historian Almakrizi describes. To this effect Klaus Wessels says, "At the height of the medieval period, Arab writers describe magnificent paintings; those of the shrine of St, Menas, for example, were especially famed, but little survives...". However to quote S. Der Nersessian, "But even in important centres like Bawit in Upper Egypt or Saqqara

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(1) Strzygowski: Koptische Kunst XXIV.

(2) Atiya: History Of Eastern Christianity.

(3) Brooklyn Museum: Pagan & Christian Egypt, p. 10.

in Lower Egypt, the large churches are completely destroyed and the paints which covered their walls are lost forever. Only some of the smaller chapels have retained their decoration, so that, we know Coptic paintings from inferior examples". We can therefore only get a rough picture of what once was found in abundance, in the Churches and Monasteries<sup>(1)</sup> .

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COPTIC ART**

Scholars give special interest to Coptic textiles more than Icons, for the later were exposed more to ruination than the first, and until recently, Coptic textiles were exported to many foreign countries. However, in this chapter I have decided to concentrate on Coptic Icons.

### **1. COPTIC ICONS AND HELLENISM**

When Alexandria received Christianity through the Apostle St. Mark, it was ruled by the Roman Empire, and at the same time it was a leading centre of the Hellenistic culture in the East. For this reason some scholars hypothesised that the Alexandrian Christians embraced the Hellenistic culture in expressing their feeling towards the new faith. They have proved this opinion by some monuments found in the Hellenistic centres at Alexandria, Fayoum, Oases and other districts of the Delta....

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<sup>(1)</sup> K. Wessel: The Coptic Art, p. 160, 161.

Nevertheless, other scholars explain that these monuments do not represent the authentic Egyptian art, and state that the Copts refused the Hellenistic culture. To this point Pierre du Bourguet says: In the pre-Byzantine period, Coptic work appears to have been carried along in the general reaction against Hellenism...<sup>(1)</sup>

The same idea is mentioned in Pagan and Christian Egypt, where it is said, "Greek art was always foreign to Egyptian taste, and it is doubtful if many of the pieces in the Greek Style surviving from the Ptoemaic period were used for national aims".<sup>(2)</sup>

Nevertheless, we can repeat here what we have already said about Coptic Architecture, that it has its own type, independent from the Hellenistic or other styles, although it was affected by these foreign styles<sup>(3)</sup>.

It was not by chance that the Coptic art bears authentic national feelings from its commencement, modern scholars mention the following reasons which created this attitude:

**A.** In the first century Alexandria was divided into three groups: the native, the Greek and the Jewish ones. Every group was proud of its culture, arts and religion, despising those of the other two groups.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Pierre de Bourguet : Coptic Art, 1971. P. 61.

<sup>(2)</sup> Brooklyn Museum, p. 6

<sup>(3)</sup> page 90,91.

The native group found in the new faith, that is Christianity, the essential elements of their ancient Egyptian religion, such as the Trinity (Horas, Osiris and Isis), and the life to come. Naturally the Egyptians earnestly embraced Christianity, while many of the Greeks in Egypt persisted, for the most part, in their paganism, so that until the fourth century one could with good reason call the Greek in Egypt pagans and the Copts Christians<sup>(1)</sup> .

**B.** In Egypt, the Greeks' cultural, social and political standing contrasted sharply with that of the Egyptians. In essence a gulf existed between two parts of the population in Egypt<sup>(2)</sup> .

**C.** Although Christianity offered to the whole world a new positive attitude, it had its effect on all the various cultures and arts. At the same time it awoke and heightened trends of independence in classes and races that had been hitherto forced by Rome, to embrace Hellenism as the only recognised creed<sup>(3)</sup> .

The Egyptians were proud of the Pharaoh's culture after its christianisation. To this effect, Herbert Read says, "But though it (Coptic Art) is a Christian art, part of an attitude toward life that was spreading far and wide in the East and West, the Christian art of Egypt is still Egyptian...."<sup>(4)</sup>

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(1) Wessel, p. 72

(2) Coptic Church (Cairo) : St. Mark, p. 145.

(3) Ibid

(4) H. Read: Meaning of Art, 1956, p.68.

We can now say that as a result of the above mentioned factors, various types of art have run parallel to each other for several centuries. They were:

- a.** The Popular art, which bears the true national feelings, and is largely free from the influence of foreign attitudes. This type is called “Coptic Art”, or it has been referred to as “The pre-Coptic Art”.
- b.** The Hellenistic Art, represents works made in the Hellenistic centres, it has a Hellenistic style, however it is not completely isolated from the Egyptian or the local culture.
- c.** The Official Art, commissioned by the State, and bears many characteristics of the Roman art.

Because of the existence of these three kinds of art in Egypt, some scholars think that Coptic Art does not have characteristics of its own, nor can it be classified under any one style.

## **2. COPTIC ART AND MONASTICISM**

Stephen Gaselee draws attention to the Egyptian movement of Monasticism, as a form that had its effect on Coptic Art<sup>(1)</sup>. In fact, monasteries were not a form that made

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<sup>(1)</sup> The Art of Egypt through Ages, by various writers, London, the Studio, 193

demands on art, but they were pure Egyptian institutions were Coptism developed its media, language, religious ideas and its art<sup>(1)</sup> .

It is worth nothing that in the fourth century the rapid appearance of these Coptic institutions coincided with the disappearance of the Greek Institutions, such as, the gymnasium, public baths and others. This meant the rapid de-Hellenization of Egypt.

### **3. COPTIC ART AND BYZANTINE ART**

The establishment of Byzantium (Constantinople) as the capital of the Eastern Empire had its simultaneous effect upon Coptic and Byzantine Arts. Undoubtedly, the best craftsmen of Alexandria were drawn to the new royal city<sup>(2)</sup> . They transferred some Egyptian characteristics of art to Byzantium and at the same time some Byzantine characteristics were transferred to Egypt. This is shown in the Monastery of St. Menas near Alexandria and the paintings of Deir Bewit in Upper Egypt. For this reason some scholars looked upon the Coptic Art as an off-shoot of the Byzantine Art, while others took the reverse position, saying that the Coptic Art was anti-Byzantine.

Pierre du Bourguet states an sdequate suggestion when he says, “The supposed hatred of the Copts for everything Byzantine calls for reservations, and cannot be presented.... without substantial evidence. To do so is to forget the

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(1) St. Mark, p. 146.

(2) Brooklyn Museum, p. 10.

patronage of St. Hellen, revered as she was throughout the whole of Coptic Egypt; the cult of Constantine considered as a saint by the Copts, even before his canonisation in Byzantium, the relations which existed between well-known Copts and Particular Byzantine dignitaries and even certain emperors....”.

Pierre du Bourguet gives many instances of the influence of the Byzantine art on the Coptic Art, although the Coptic Art did not lose its Egyptian feelings. One of these instances in the well-known icon of ‘Christ the Protector of St. Menas the Monk’, in which St. Menas stands on the right hand of Christ, while the Lord places His arm on his shoulders to protect him. Pierre du Bourguet recognised in this icon of the sixth century the following points:

**A.** It has some Byzantine elements like the nimbus, and the book which Christ holds, with its embellishment of simulated precious stones.

**B.** The icon relates an Egyptian story, for St. Menas lived in Egypt and was martyred there.

**C.** The features of Christ’s are purely Egyptian.

**D.** The horizon is an Egyptian view; the colour of the flaming sunset sky is typically Egyptian, and the two heads are portrayed into the horizon as though the Lord with His arm encircling the saint’s shoulder, would enter with Him into that which is beyond earth’s horizon. It is important to note here, that painting the sunset in a red colour is a Pharaonic tradition, in which the Divine Sun reigns in splendour.

**E.** The two heads are very large and the proportion of the two bodies is very small in comparison. This is the attitude of a Coptic artist who appears to have shown little interest in proportions.

#### **4. COPTIC ART AND THE COUNCIL OF CHALDECON**

In the fifth century, at the Council of Chaldecon, the Church of Alexandria was accused as being Eutychain, attributed to Eutyches who assumed that our Lord has only one nature, for His humanity is totally absorbed in His divinity and has completely vanished like a drop of vinegar in the ocean. In fact, our Church believes in one nature of Christ, but she is not Eutychain, for the Lord's nature preserves all the human properties completely as well as all the divine properties, without mingling, interchanging, nor with Alteration. Christ has one nature, of two natures, for His humanity and divinity are united in the real sense of the word "union"<sup>(1)</sup>.

Nevertheless the Alexandrian Pope was forced not to attend all the council meetings and was exiled. A battle waged in Egypt between the Melkites (the Byzantine Christians who are loyal to the Emperor) and the Copts. The Melkites tried in vain to appoint one of them as a Patriarch of Alexandria, or to ordain one of the Copts who agreed to follow them. The Coptic churches, monasteries and houses were destroyed, and the people were martyred by the Christian Melkites who

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<sup>(1)</sup> Dr. Waheeb A. Girgis (Bishop Gregorius).. Chritological Teaching of the Non-Chalcedonian Churches

possessed both civil and church powers. These circumstances created the national feeling of hatred by the Copts, towards everything Byzantine, and thus the movement of what we call “Coptism” appeared.

At the middle of the seventh century, the Arabs conquered Egypt and it was the end of every relationship between Alexandria and the two capitals - Byzantium and Rome.

In this new stage, the Copts offered all their architectural experience to the new rulers, in order that the latter would not touch the church pillars. The art of textiles was growing, and for their textiles were sent to the Arabian Desert, while at the same time paintings were exposed to destruction and valuable pieces were lost for ever.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF COPTIC ICONS**

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In discussing the characteristics of Coptic Icons, I therefore refer to the following two facts:

**A.** Icons represent a vital part of our church tradition, developed through the ages within the limits of our tradition.

I refer to this point because in Egypt some Icon makers copied the European pictures that which led to strong reactions, for other icon makers began to declare that they needed to study the characteristics of authentic Coptic Icons and return to their own style of art. This reaction does not mean that we have to copy our ancient Icons as they are, but it does mean that we need to penetrate into their spirit and preserve the attitude of our art in a modern way. We do not hold fast ancient Icons just because they are ancient, but we need to understand the thought of our Early fathers through them.

**B.** Coptic Icons reveal our church attitudes, ideas, dogmas and spirituality.

I will now refer to some of our Icons characteristics:

### **1. REPRESENTING JOYFUL LIFE**

Many historians and artists have noticed that our icons appear joyous. None of the Lord's or martyrs' suffering are

shown in Icons, except the victorious Cross, where the Lord is hung as King of kings.

There are no pictures of Hell, only of Heaven, heavenly creatures and heavenly crowns. This seems to evidence the church's wish to grant hope to her children, and not to frighten them by the terrible tortures of Hell.

On this point Butler states that, "There is a remarkable difference between the Greek and the Coptic paintings, and it is a point which should not be ignored, of it distinguishes the Coptic art not only from the Greek art but also from all the art of Western Christendom. The Copts seem to be the only Christian, who do not delight to paint the tortures of Saints on earth or sinners in hell".<sup>(1)</sup>

Mrs. Butcher refers to the same point as she says, "Though the church of Egypt has suffered from persecution, and the terrible tortures, too often with marked consequences, more than any other church in the world, yet these persecution have not destroyed the tender hopefulness of her religious life. Wherever you go in the poverty stricken Egyptian Churches, you will not find one representation of hell or torture, no grinning skull or ghastly skeleton. Her martyrs smile calmly down from the walls, as if the memory of their sufferings were long forgotten".<sup>(1)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> Butler: ancient churches of Egypt, vol 2, p. 92, 93.

<sup>(1)</sup> Butcher, vol. 2, p. 89.

## **2 FULL OF THE SPIRIT OF VICTORY**

As long as the church seeks to create a spirit of confidence in her children, there will be no paintings of demons. In necessity they appear in small sizes, trodden under the feet of the Lord; archangels or martyrs, in weakness.

## **3. ICONS OF LOVE AND KINDNESS**

Coptic Iconography expresses feelings of love and kindness. The following are some examples:

**I.** Icons of Deir-Bewit contain many representations of St. Mary with her suckling child Jesus, In lovely - motherhood. (see pages 325 - 339).

**II.** In page 404 you see a Coptic graven image made from wood, where the cheeks of St. Mary and her son are touched in kindness, while each person's hand is placed on the other person's shoulder in gentle tenderness.

This Coptic attitude differs from that of the Greeks, for Fedatov states that, "The Greek Church usually paints the Lord Jesus and His mother in glory; the Lord appears as 'the Saviour Ardent Eye', and St. Mary as the Heavenly Queen in her majesty. The Child often looks with omniscient un-child like eyes".

#### **4. EXPRESSION OF THE STRENGTH OF SPIRIT**

In Coptic Icons you often see the heads of figures enlarged. The eyes are wide, and the bodies are ill-proportioned, for the Coptic Iconographers do not represent the bodily features, but rather meet the inner strength of the spirit. The heads are enlarged as a symbol of God who is our heavenly Head, and the eyes are wide as a sign of the inner sight.

Even the worshippers themselves concentrate on the strength of the spirit with Icons represent. On their entry into the church they stand near the Icons, bow their heads and touch just the frame of the Icon with their fingers, asking for the prayers of the Saints or for the blessings of God, giving little or no attention to the details of the representation.

It is important to note that the Icon of St. Mary's assumption at Deir-El-Soryan in Wadi-El-Natroun, the soul of St. Mary born by her Son has the same shape of her body which is laid on a bed among the Disciples. This idea, which is quoted from the ancient Egyptian art, as the winged - soul was depicted flying, upon the body having the same shape, declares that in portraying persons, the Copts usually mean their soul and not their bodily features.

#### **5. HAVING AN ATTITUDE OF PRAYER**

Wessel states that the Coptic artist, when depicting male Saints, knows only one attitude, that of prayer. Saints usually appear raising their hands in prayer to God, as see in the figure

of the “orant”, as if they declare that prayer is the mystery of their holiness<sup>(1)</sup> .

We here give some examples:

**A.** In pages below, a fragment of a tombstone in Dumbarton Oaks Collections, showing an old monk in the shape of orant.

**B.** In page 244 below, St. Mary stands in orant between the Disciples and two local Saints.

**C.** In pages 243 below, a carving on a movable relief in Vienna, showing St. Menas standing in orant, between two camels.

**D.** Page 245 below : A pyxis has a representation of St. Menas standing in orant.

**E.** Page 245 below : A painted ivory pyxis represents Daniel in the lion’s den, in the shape of orant (6th century).

This attitude emulates the position of Christ on the Cross and is important gesture of the priest in the Liturgy. It is the position of many martyrs and saints on their departure to paradise. It was also the position of praying in the Early Church which Tertullian describes, “Looking up with hands spread open and head uncovered”.<sup>(2)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> Fedatov: Russian religious mind, vol 2, p. 359

<sup>(2)</sup> Wessel, p.45







## **6. BEARING THE CROSS**

Smith<sup>(1)</sup> has observed, that Christ, in the majority of the Alexandrian paintings, bears a Coptic Cross, as if the Church is asking us to look to Him as our Saviour.

Christ appears thus in the Icons of Healing of the Paralytic, Raising of Lazarus, His Entry into Jerusalem and so on even in the Icon of His Childhood at Deir St. Menas at Old Cairo, the legs of the Child are crossed and His arms outspread, possibly in a manner meant to foreshadow the Cross.<sup>(2)</sup>

## **7. THE LORD'S PROVIDENCE**

The Coptic Iconographer finds it necessary to depict the Lord hanging on the Cross, with opened eyes as a sign of His immortality and continual providence. According to St. Eulogius of Alexandria, "The Lord slept on the Cross for a brief time, as shown by His body; but His divine eyes remained opened, for He is God".

## **8. THE INNER SIGHT**

Saints and heavenly creatures are depicted with two eyes as a sign of their inner sight, while wicked persons like Jude are depicted from his side with one eye as a sign of his

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<sup>(1)</sup> Tertullian: I Apol. 30.

<sup>(2)</sup> Smith E.B.: Early Christian Iconography, 1918, p 106, 118, 126, 127

looking towards earthly things while the other eye, that is the inner sight is totally darkened.

The wide eyes of Saints in Coptic Art followed the ancient Egyptians type. You see them looking straight unto the eyes of their beholders as if they desire to call them to follow them unto their heavenly home.

## **9. THE MILITARY SAINTS**

The Coptic Church as a “Church of Martyrs” is familiar with her Icons of military Saints such as, SS. George, Menas, Theodore Victor, Markerius (Two-sworded Saints) and so on.

Scott Moncrief states that, “the Origin of the Icon of St. George and the Dragon, is to be found in the Egyptian representations of the fight between Horus and Set”.

## **COMMENTS ON COPTIC ICONS**

The Coptic Artist dare not picture the Father, for He is unseen. On rare occasions He is depicted in a symbol as a Hand going through the clouds, but He is never depicted as an aged man, for He is not Incarnated.

Secondly, passing now from the subject to the form one may note that the Copts do not share the Byzantine or Greek practice of over-laying their panel pictures with plates of silver or setting them in metal frames<sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Butler, vol I , p.53.

## **COPTIC ART AND ITS INFLUENCE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD**

In the first centuries Egypt attracted many church leaders from the East and the West, to study the Holy Bible and theology in the School of Alexandria. They also practised the angelic life in her deserts. Alexandrian teachers and monks preached into many countries. Through this openness of the Alexandrian Church, Coptic and Pharaonic arts spread indirectly throughout the whole world.

1. Naturally Coptic Art had its effect on the arts of Ethiopia, Libya, Nubia , the Sudan and so on as the bishops of these countries were following the Alexandrian See.

2. A resemblance has been observed between Celtic design and Coptic decoration motifs <sup>(1)</sup>. A possible explanation of this resemblance might be found in the contact between the monks from Egypt and those from Ireland, for seven Egyptian monks preached in Ireland, and they were buried at “Desert Ulidh”.

Wessel states that<sup>(2)</sup> “Coptic influence penetrated in to the Irish Art, and then went over once again into the developing German Art. The Irish Church provided its wandering monks, and zealous missionaries, not only with the joyful tidings but also with the artistic spirit of the native church. Everywhere they settled, these Irish envoys employed themselves in spreading their art, and with it, indirect influences....”.

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(1) Ibid, p.95

(2) Cawthra Mulock the Icons Of Yuhanne & Ibrahim The Scribe, London 1946, p.12.

3. The Coptic Art had its influence throughout the whole Roman Empire and extended outside the Empire, through the Coptic textiles.

4. Smith states that, “The icon of Christ the Triumphant, or the representation of Christ trampling underfoot the lion, the dragon, the asp and the basilisk, is known in Early French Art as quoted from Egypt. The same portrait in the catacombs of Alexandria was quoted from the Ancient Egyptian Art (Horus conquering the Reptiles). Smith says: This transmission of Egyptian types into Early French Art is neither surprising nor peculiar to this particular scene. In the first place it was natural, about the Eastern influence which entered Provence through Marseilles and spread through Gaul in Carlingian time.....”<sup>(1)</sup>



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<sup>(1)</sup> Wessel, p. 232, 233.

# **CHAPTER 10**

## **SYMBOLS AND CHURCH BUILDING**

As the church building - as a whole - is a symbol of the Heavenly life, it is no wonder that every part of it, especially the Iconostasis (Icon-stand) is decorated by Christian symbol such as crosses, fish, lambs, vines, doves and so on.

In fact, symbolism plays a vital role in our daily life and it is used in the Holy Scriptures and in church life.

## **1. SYMBOLISM IN OUR DAILY LIFE**

Symbolism in the natural language of creation. No man teaches the hunted animal to cry, the sick baby to weep or the suffering man to sigh. These symbols are used even without understanding on the part of the person concerned.

Many psychologists have devoted their efforts to the study of symbols, looking upon them as a mirror which discovers the person's character; this includes attitudes, feelings, abilities, hopes, emotions and so on. Psychologists can conceive the inner realities of man through symbols such as: dreams, colour preference, size and shape of letters in writing, music, books and friends a man may have, and such like.

## **2. SYMBOLISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Among the Jews, symbolism was one of the most striking features, the Mosaic ritual in essence was a wonderful symbolic action.

Symbols of language, colour, numbers, events and actions are also used in the Old Testament.

## **A. SYMBOLISM OF LANGUAGE**

Solomon in Song ( 2: 3 ) says, “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste”.

It is a symbol of our fellowship with the Incarnate God, ‘The Apple Tree’; who among men (trees of wood) has the sweet fruit. Under the shadow of His cross we are comforted and attain the eternal peace.

## **B. SYMBOLISM OF COLOURS**

White colour as an example is accepted in the Old Testament as a symbol of innocence of soul, purity of thought and holiness of life.

In 2 Chronicles ( 5: 12 ) we read that the Levites at the dedication of the temple were ‘arrayed in white linen ....’. The same idea is transferred to the New Testament and church rituals.

At the Lord’s transfiguration, ‘His garment was white as the light.’ (Mark 9: 2, 3).

The angel of Christ’s tomb was clothed in vestment, white as snow.

The newly baptised wear white garments, and the clothes of liturgical services are white.

This concept is alluded to by St. Cyprian who writes to the Church of Carthage during the Decian persecution, “Blessed is our Church, illuminated with so divine a glory, and ennobled in our day by the blood of the martyrs. She was before white with the purity of her children, now she has found a robe of purple in their blood”.

The scarlet which Rahab set on her house was a symbol of the redeeming blood; and the blue used in the tabernacle was a symbol of the heavenly life.

### **C. SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS**

The number seven is used in the Old Testament as a symbol of perfection. Balaam, as an effectual test of will of God built seven altars and prepared seven oxen and seven rams for sacrifice.

Job, referring to the effectual protection of providence says, “In seven troubles there shall no evil touch you”, and Jacob, as a sign of his complete submission bowed himself seven times before his brother Esau. Naaman was commanded to bathe seven times in the Jordan as a prelude to his complete restoration to health<sup>(1)</sup>.

St. Augustine gives the following explanation, that man is the perfect creature on earth, he is composed of the soul, on

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hulme: Symbolism in Christian Art, 1908

the form of the Holy Trinity (three), plus the body coming forth from earth or the world which has four corners: that is, north, south east and west (four), the total sum being seven.

The number eight refers to the world to come, the heavenly life or the new life, for it surpasses number seven, i.e., the days of the week. For this reason the boy child was circumcised on the eighth day of his birth.

Number twelve is a symbol of God's kingdom on earth as the Holy Trinity (three) reigns over the four corners of the world (three multiplied by four equal twelve). For this reason there were twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples of Christ and twelve doors of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

#### **D. SYMBOLISM OF EVENTS**

The following are examples of symbolism in the Old Testament which represent the Cross. The sacrifice of Isaac, the ladder of Jacob, the selling of Joseph, the lamb of Pasch, passing over the Red Sea, the victory of the people over Amalek through the stretched arms of Moses, the Brazen Serpent, striking the Rock and such like.

#### **E. SYMBOLISM OF ACTS**

Examples of these are seen in the Mosaic rites of worship, that is in sacrifices, the vestments of priests and ceremonies of feasts.

## **F. SYMBOLISM OF THE OLD TEMPLE**

God did not order the ancient people to decorate His House with symbols merely for purposes of beauty, but rather as an essential part of the ritual worship.

The following Bible verse show the setting up to these symbols.

“All round the Temple walls he carved figures of Cherubim, palm trees and rosettes, both inside and outside”. (1 Kings 6: 29).

“He carved on the door figures of Cherubim, palm trees and rosettes which he plated with gold”. (1 Kings 6: 32).

“There was cedar wood round the inside of the Temple, ornamentally carved with gourds and rosettes”. (1 Kings 6: 12).

“He also made pomegranates: two rows of them round each filigree, four hundred in all.... The capitals surmounting the pillars were flower-shaped”. (1 Kings 7).

## **3. SYMBOLISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Symbols of the Old Testament are fulfilled by the sacrifice of Christ, evidenced in the New Testament, and He Himself used Symbols. He declares Himself as the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way and so on, to deepen our understanding towards His person and His redeeming actions.

Moreover, as symbols were used as a preparation for the Messiah's advent they are still used for the same purpose as a preparation for his last advent, as it is clearly evidenced in the book of Revelation.

#### **4. SYMBOLISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

Wyriwhitt says<sup>(1)</sup>, "It can hardly be denied that the symbolic picture of the Vine of the Pastor bearing the lost lamb, are simply picture - writings of the words, "I am the True Vine", or "I am the Good Shepherd".

On this ground, symbols were painted on the church walls and ceilings from the first century; carved rings also, were seen in the early Christian homes, along with cups, plates, chairs and so on.

In the second century, St. Clement of Alexandria suggested to the Christians of his day, that they should have such devices as a dove, a palm branch, an anchor, a ship, a fish and so on cut on stones and rings, in place of pagan subjects<sup>(2)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Wyriwhitt, p. 41

<sup>(2)</sup> St. Clement of Alexandria: Paedagogus 3:2:59.



EARLY CHRISTIAN RINGS



From a Roman Tomb, Central Syria. De Vogüé - *Spéc. Carthage*,  
Pl. XLII.

Cutts: *Early Christian Art*

## THE SPIRITUAL VALUES<sup>(1)</sup> OF SYMBOLS

1. Symbols were used by the Early Church, as they have wealth of spiritual meaning which words inadequately express.
2. Symbols also were used by Christians who found refuge from persecution in the catacombs, which expressed their faith at the same time conveying no meaning to the pagans around them<sup>(2)</sup>. In other words, symbols were a means of introducing oneself to the persecuted group.

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(1) Fleming: *Christian Symbols in a World Community*, Ch.2.

(2) Hulme, p. 2.

## THE SYMBOL'S POWER

Paul Tillich<sup>(1)</sup> makes a distinction between “symbol” and “sign”, for a religious symbol has an innate power while sign is impotent in itself.

The symbol attains its strength from its prototype, such as the brazen serpent, which had the power of healing not because of its physical form or its shape, but as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice.

In the same way St. George spoiled the effect of deadly poison by signing the symbol of the cross on it.



*Coptic carved stone with anasted Cross  
(Egyptian sign of ankh, or the sign of life),  
5<sup>th</sup> century - now in Louvre*

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<sup>(1)</sup> Rolo May: Symbolism in religion and Literature. 1961, p. 76.

## **SYMBOLS IN THE COPTIC CHURCH**

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Although St. Clement of Alexandria is the first Christian writer who suggests using symbols, yet the Church of Alexandria does not use these hundreds of symbols known in the pictures of Western Churches.

It is worth noting that the Coptic Church does not use symbolic pictures as those of the Good Shepherd and Christ knocking on the door. You only see symbols used in decorating the Iconostasis, the Pillars, walls and ceilings of the church, or as a part of an Icon.

### **EXAMPLES OF SYMBOLS**

#### **1. THE FISH**

It was the most frequent and favourite symbol in the Early Church. Its symbolism was manifold as shown in the following examples.

**Firstly**, the fish symbolises God's believer. In Matthew 13:47, and in Luke 5:4 - 10 it is used by the Lord Himself as an emblem of His people. In calling His disciples He also said, "follow me, I will make you to become fishers of men".

To this effect St. Cyril of Jerusalem says that "Christ catches us with a hook, not to slay us, but after slaying to make us alive".



Believers of the New and Old Testaments are bound to the Cross, the true Anchor.



An Apostle as a Fisherman. Catacomb of St. Callistus, at Rome.

St, Gregory of Nazianzus speaks of the Martyrs as being baptised in their blood and of other believers as fish for whom the water of baptism suffices <sup>(1)</sup>.

The bronze and glass fishes which have been found in the catacombs, of which one bears on its side the Greek word ‘cwca’ i.e. “May You Save” are believed to have been sometimes worn around the neck after baptism <sup>(2)</sup>.

**Secondly**, the fish is a symbol of Christ. Origen writes <sup>(3)</sup> that: “Christ is metaphorically called the fish”. Tertullian also says <sup>(4)</sup>, “We little fishes, according to our Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by remaining in water”.

When Bonosus, the friend of St. Jerome retired to an island hermitage, St. Jerome wrote to him, “Bonosus, as the son of the fish... seeks watery places” <sup>(5)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus: resurrection, 52.

<sup>(2)</sup> Farrar: Life of Christ as represented in Art, 1896, p. 14.

<sup>(3)</sup> Origen: In Mt. 5.

<sup>(4)</sup> Tertullian : De Bapt. 1

<sup>(5)</sup> Farrar, p. 14.

St. Augustine also alluded to this fact that Jesus Christ is called the Fish, “because He was able to live in the abyss of this mortality as in the depths of the water, that is without sin”.<sup>(6)</sup>

Christ is called the Fish, as the Greek letters of the word fish ‘ IXQUS ’ contains the initial letters of the words: ‘HISOUS XRISTOS QHOU, SOTHR ‘ ie. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, the Saviour.

Another reason for calling Christ ‘the Fish’ is that the fish of Tobias who drove out the demons, was a type of Christ. In the Talmud the Messiah is called ‘Dag’ or ‘Fish’. The fish was also one of the articles of food with which the Lord fed the multitude as a symbol of Himself, the Bread of Life.

It is important to note that in some medieval Coptic representations of the Last Supper, the fish fills the table as a symbol of the Sacrificial Christ or the Eucharistic Mystery.



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<sup>(6)</sup> St. Augustine: De Civit Dieo 18:25.



## 2. THE DOLPHIN

The British Museum preserves a Coptic carving of a dolphin with a wreathed cross balanced on its nose by vine (6<sup>th</sup> century). It refers to the soul of the believer who smells the odour of Christ through the victorious cross and open her spiritual mouth to eat and drink the Eucharistic food (the grapes of the Vine).

However, the dolphin was regarded as of all fish the friendliest to man. St. Paulinus of Nola alludes to this ancient belief in his letter to his spiritual father, Delphinus.

### 3. THE BIRDS

In the earliest days of Christians Art, birds were used as symbols of the winged souls, <sup>(1)</sup> : it is one feature in which the Coptic Art had developed from the Ancient Egyptian belief in the nature of the human soul, expressed by the Ba-bird.<sup>(2)</sup>

### 4. THE DOVE

It was one of the most familiar symbols in Early Christian Art, for it has many symbolic meanings.

**Firstly**, in its highest use, as a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is found in the Icons of the Annunciation to St. Mary and of the Lord's Baptism.

**Secondly**, it symbolises the virtues of the believers as gifts of the Holy Spirit, specially peace, meekness and purity.

It reminds us of that dove of Noah which brought back an olive branch to show that waters had receded and that God had made peace with mankind (Gen. 8). To this effect, St. Augustine says that this dove refers to the soul returning to the true Arc, <sup>(3)</sup> that is, the Church, entering through the opened side of Christ.

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(1) Ferguson: Signs and Symbols in Christian Art. N.Y. 1955, p. 6.

(2) Child & Colies: Christian symbols, 1971, p. 192

(3) St. Augustine: in Joan, Hom 120. PL 35: 1935.

Doves are symbols of meekness as the Lord Himself says: “Be you meek as doves”, and of purity, for according to the Mosaic Law, doves were offered for purification after the birth of a child.

**Thirdly**, St. Paulinus<sup>(1)</sup> states that doves are used in Early Church as symbols of Apostles and Disciples. They are also symbols of Christian People, as St. Cyprian<sup>(2)</sup> alludes to, but it was never used as an emblem of Christ<sup>(3)</sup>



Coptic funerary stele -  
7th century.  
Now in the British Museum.



A stone carving  
from Caesarea in Palestine.



Coptic funerary stele  
from Kenna.

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- (1) St. Paulinus, Epistle 11.
  - (2) St. Cyprian: Unity of Church, 8.
  - (3) Farrar, p. 10.

## 5. THE EAGLE

A single monument, occurs in a fresco at Bawit in Upper-Egypt, which may date from about the sixth century. Above its head, and raised wings are three identical wreaths, each one enclosing the two letters α & ω which are usually placed beside Christ; for He is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last. The whole image presents a figure of the Holy Trinity conceived through the True Eagle, Jesus Christ<sup>(1)</sup>

We have already mentioned that the eagle is usually pictured close to St. John the Disciple as his symbol. One of the four Living Creature standing around the Divine Throne has the shape of the eagle.

## 6. OTHER SYMBOLS

The Coptic Church uses other symbols as listed below:

**Firstly**, the grapes of vine as a symbol of Christ (John 15 : 1, 5). It also points to His sacrificial Blood, that is the Eucharistic Blood.

**Secondly**, the lamb symbolises Christ, the Lamb of God. It also symbolises the faithful people who are fed by the Good Shepherd (John 10).

**Thirdly**, the Anchor, as a natural emblem of hope.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Grabar : Christian Iconography, London 1969.

**Fourthly**, the ship stood for the church and for the voyage of life which ends in the harbour of peaceful death.

**Fifthly**, the Phoenix, an imaginary bird, which St. Clement of Alexandria refers to as ‘an emblem of resurrection’<sup>(1)</sup>.

Tertullian and other Fathers relate its story: “Every four hundred years it comes from the Arabian Desert to the Altar of Sun at Heliopolis in Egypt, and brings with it a great quantity of cinnamon, cassia and balsam-wood; and starting towards the East praying to the Sun it dies and becomes dust, being buried in that material it brings from Arabia. A worm arises again out of these ashes and is formed into a new phoenix, able to fly and go to Arabia”<sup>(2)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> I Clement 25.

<sup>(2)</sup> Tertullian: Resurrection 13.

# **CHAPTER 11**

## **THE CROSS**

## **THE CROSS IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

Using the Cross in the Christian's daily life, his worship and in setting church building did not begin until quite late; for Christians had to teach the world to regard this symbol of shame and ignominious death, as the symbol of victory and salvation. "God forbid", says the Apostle Paul, "that I glory save in the Cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ".

In the second century and the beginning of the third, Tertullian<sup>(1)</sup> reported that the following beautiful practice was used;

"In all our undertakings:  
when coming in and going out,  
before putting on our clothes,  
before bathing,  
when at table,  
when lighting our lamps in the evening,  
before reclining at night,  
when sitting down to read,  
in all the ordinary occupations of our daily lives,  
we furrow our foreheads with sign of the Cross"

St. Ambrose also witnesses that this custom was still alive in his time.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Tertullian: De Corono 3, PL 2:80.

This belief had its effect on the houses of worshipping. As an instance, the churches of the second century in Syria used to hang or inscribe a Cross on the wall facing the worshippers to point out the direction of the east.<sup>(1)</sup>

This custom was so familiar that the pagans of the second century accused the Christians of praying to the Cross, however Minacius Felix explained that this veneration was meant for Christ Himself and not for the Cross materials.<sup>(2)</sup>

It is noteworthy that using the cross on a large scale in the church buildings, in the fourth century, was a natural result of the appearance of a cross in the sky to the Emperor Constantine and the discovery of the Cross by his mother, the Empress Helene.

In the biography of the Emperor Constantine, Eusebius related to us that the Emperor wanted to wage a campaign against Maxentius; he prayed to his father's god, asking him to reveal himself and grant his aid. On the same day, late in the afternoon the Emperor and his soldiers saw the radiant victory sign of the Cross above the sun in the sky, Inscribed upon it were the words, 'By this sign you will conquer...'.<sup>(3)</sup> From that moment, Constantine was converted to Christianity and loved this sign of God, not only to conquer in this world, but also as sign of eternal victory.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Pocknee: Cross & Crucifix, London 1962, p.36.

<sup>(2)</sup> Edward Syndicus: Early Christian Art, 1962, p.103.

<sup>(3)</sup> Eusebius: De Vita Constant. 1:28, PG 20; 944.

In the year 326 AD, Empress Helene visited the Holy Land, for the purpose of discovering the Holy Cross. She was guided to its place by the old rabbi Jude, who eventually became converted and baptised in the name of Keriaceous<sup>(1)</sup>. He told her that the Jews covered it by a huge hill of garbage... When the soldiers saw their empress throwing herself on her knees in the dust, they worked day and night with zeal, in order to clear up this huge hill. After removing a mass of garbage, twenty feet deep by three hundred feet long, they came to a spacious cave. Helene knelt on her knees in the cave and prayed to God to show her His Cross. After some time three crosses were brought to light. The Lord's Cross was known, as the dead widow called Libania rose again on touching it. Seeing this, the Empress embraced the Holy Cross and a sweetness of grace penetrated through her innermost parts of the soul.<sup>(2)</sup>

All the multitudes were flocking together with joy, embracing the Cross and shouting 'Kyrie Eleyson'.<sup>(3)</sup> When the night had fallen, Bishop Makarios and Empress Helene held the Cross in triumph by torch light, chanting hymns, to the oratory of the Church<sup>(4)</sup>.

This was a valid new start for using the Cross in Church buildings.

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(1) Gregory of Tours: H.E. Francorum 1:34. PL 71:179.

(2) St. Ambrose: De AD Theod. PL 16:1401.

(3) Menol Groec. PG 117:47.

(4) Coptic Orthodox Church of Melbourne: Weekly Bulletin, No. 25 Sept.

# **THE CROSS AND THE CHURCH BIULDING**

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The Church in its mystical reality is the Lord's Cross, where His Body, and His people, are glorified. Therefore, the Cross is lifted upon the canopy of the Altar, the Iconostasis and the church tower. It is used as an essential symbol in the decoration of every corner of the church building. A hand cross is held in front of every church procession.

In essence, the Cross is correlated with the whole life of the church.

Now, I would like to mention the relationship between the Cross and the Altar, the Iconostasis and the church tower.

## **1. THE CROSS AND THE ALTAR**

We have already mentioned that in the Coptic Church, the Cross is not fixed upon the Altar, for the Altar itself is the Lord's Cross upon which His sacrificial Body and Blood are offered. The canopy of the Altar is decorated and surmounted by Crosses.<sup>(1)</sup>

In the altar service, I mean during the liturgical celebration, the priest uses a hand cross as an article of the holy vessels. He uses it in all his priestly ministering: in crossing the

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<sup>(1)</sup> See page 184- 7.

oblations and the incense, in consecrating the baptismal water, blessing the bridal couple, giving peace to God's people and in asking the absolution of sins. He holds it while reading the Gospel and addressing the sermon.

Using the hand cross during the Altar service bears various mystical meanings, such as:

*First*, the priestly work is based on the hiding of every priest in the Lord's Cross, so that he will not act by himself but the Lord works through Him. The Lord is the Heavenly Bishop of our souls, in whom all bishops and priests must be hidden.

ST. John Chrysostom says that "When you see the priest who presents the sacrifice, it is as if the unseen Christ's hand is working".<sup>(1)</sup> ST. John Saba states the same thing, as he says that a faithful brother said to him, "When I started to celebrate the divine mysteries, saw Christ Himself ministering with unspeakable glory".

*Second*, making use of the hand cross during the Altar service assures us that all our worship and offerings are presented through Christ's sacrifice and in His Name. We are unworthy to worship God, but in Christ and through His Cross we become God's children, and therefore our worship is accepted.

*Third*; using the hand cross in the altar service, is evidence of the Christian Fact that the Cross represents the presence of Christ amongst His people, as the Living and

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<sup>(1)</sup> Divine Love p23,27

Life-giving One. This fact in the early authentic and apocryphal writings. In the ‘Gospel of Peter’ the writer replaced the Risen Christ with the Cross, which walks, preaches and speaks with the Father. The writer says, “At the moment of the Resurrection, the guards saw three men come out of the tomb, two of them bore up the third, and a Cross followed after them and they heard a voice out of the heaven saying, “Have You preached unto them that sleep? An answer was heard from the Cross saying: “Yes”.

This apocryphal text declares a theological significance of the Cross in the Early Church. It was not merely the wood upon which Christ was crucified, but it is spiritual, mysterious and living reality which accompanies the Crucified and Risen Christ. It represents Christ Himself who continuously acts for our salvation.

In another early apocryphal text, “Acts of John”, there is a hymn to the Cross in which quite clearly the early Christians looked to the Cross as representing Christ. The writer says:

“Christ showed me a Cross of Light.  
And I saw the Lord Himself on the Cross,  
not having any shape but only a voice.  
And a voice not such as was familiar to us,  
but one sweet and gently and truly divine, saying to me:  
“This Cross of Light is called by Me,  
sometimes Word, sometimes Mind, sometimes Jesus,  
Sometimes Christ, sometimes Door, sometimes Bread,  
Seed, Resurrection, Father, Son, Spirit, Life, Truth,  
Faith and sometimes Grace!”.

This text has a Gnostic attitude, but it declares that Christ is present mystically in the Cross, and through the Cross we see the Holy Trinity, and to it all the names of Christ in the scripture are attributed.

## **2. THE CROSS AND THE ICONOSTASIS**

It is not by chance that the Cross surmounts the Iconostasis and represents one of the more familiar symbols used in its decoration, for there is a close relationship between the Cross and the Iconostasis.

*First;* if the Iconostasis is a church book written by the simple language of colours to declare the effect of God's word in the life of men of the New and Old Testaments; the Cross is the "word of God" which is spoken by the language of practical love in its fullness.

*Second;* the Cross that surmounts the Icons of saints and angels explains that the unity between saints and heavenly creatures has been realised through Christ's Cross.

*Third,* the Cross surmounts the Icons of events of the Old Testament, for these events typify the Cross.

ST. Justin mentions the following events and articles as symbols of the Messiah's Cross:

- The sacrifice of the Pasch;<sup>(1)</sup>
- The tree life in the Paradise;
- The staff of Moses which divides the waters of the Red Sea, <sup>(2)</sup> makes water spring from the rock and sweetens the bitter water of Mara;
- The stones thrown by Jacob into the water ducts (Gen. 30: 37);
- Jacob's ladder;
- The blossoming rod of Aaron;
- The stem of Jesse;
- The Oak of Mamre;
- The seventy trees that the people found near the twelve springs after crossing the Jordan;
- The rod and staff which comfort David in Psalm 23;
- The staff which designated Judah;
- The wood of the axe thrown into the Jordan;
- The ark of Noah;<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) St. Justin Dial. 11: 4.

(2) Ibid 138:2.

(3) Ibid 86:1 - 6.

- The bronze serpent<sup>(1)</sup>

**Fourth;** the Cross surmounts also Icons of events of the New Testament, to prove that the Cross is the centre of the Gospel events. Through the Cross we understand all the events of the Lord's life on earth such as His nativity, baptism, temptation, miracles, resurrection and His ascension.

**Fifth,** on the sides of the Cross we see the portraits of St. Mary and St. John the Disciple, as if the Lord reveals that by our fellowship with the Crucified Christ, we receive His mother as ours, just as St. John received her.

**Lastly,** we look at the Crucified Christ who stretched His hands just as the Eagle's wings to protect His saints and raise them up to His heavenly nest.

## **THE CROSS AND THE CHURCH TOWER**

The Cross finds its own place not only inside the church building, but also from outside above the church tower (minaret). This position has varied significance as revealed below.

**First;** the Cross here represents the divine flag, which declares that the whole church is in subjection to the dominion of the Crucified Lord, and lives with His Law guided by His Holy Spirit, and preaches His Gospel.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid 138:2.

In other words, this divine flag reveals to the whole world that there is no message to the Church except to follow the Crucified Christ.

**Second;** this up lifted Cross refers to the Lord's last advent. Our Lord mentions this eschatological significance of the Cross, saying, "Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven". (Mt. 24:30). The Didache, in the second century, designates that the appearance of the Cross is the first sign of the Lord's Parousia (His advent). The Apocalypse of Peter states, "As the lightning that shines from the East into the West, so will I come upon the clouds of Heaven in My glory while My Cross shall go before My face".<sup>(1)</sup>

We can say that the Cross which surmounts the church minaret or the church dome, is a church voice addressed to the whole world, that men need to be prepared for God's advent in His eternal glories.

**Third;** as the world is occupied for true unity and peace for many centuries this Cross has expressed that apart from it, there is no other way for true unity and peace to exist.

St. Paul mentions this ecumenical significance by saying, "For He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in His own person the hostility". (Eph. 2:13,14).

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ibid 94:3.

In other words, through the Cross, Christ destroys two separations the vertical one, or vertical barrier which separates the two people - the Jews and the Gentiles; and the horizontal barrier which separates God and man, or the above and the world below.

The Holy Fathers refer to these two levels of reconciliation, peace and unity, or the horizontal and vertical as recognised in the following:

+ He was hung upon the Tree that He might sum up all things in Him.

ST. IRENAEUS<sup>(1)</sup>

+ For as we lost Him by means of a tree, by means of a Tree again has He been manifest to all, showing the height, length, breadth and depth in Himself.

And as one of our predecessors has said, 'Reuniting the two people in One God, by stretching forth His hands. For there were two hands, because there were two peoples scattered to the end of the earth, and there was but one Head as there is but One God'.

ST. IRENAEUS<sup>(2)</sup>

ST. Gregory of Nyssa states that "the Cross is in a manner the bond of the universe".

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(1) Reve De L'Orient Chretien 1910, p. 209. - Danielou: A History of Early Christian Doctrine, vol. 1 ch 19.

(2) St. Irenaeus: Adv. Hear. 5:19:1.

St. Hippolytus says that “the Cross is Jacob’s ladder... This Tree of heavenly dimensions has raised Itself from earth to heaven, fixing Itself an eternal plant, between heaven and earth, to uphold the universe, holding together the variety of human nature”.<sup>(1)</sup>

+ He stretched out His hands on the Cross that He might embrace the ends of the world.

ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM<sup>(2)</sup>

+ It was fitting for the Lord to spread out His hands... that with the one He might draw the ancient people and with the other the Gentiles, to unite both in Him.

ST. ATHANASIUS<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) Ibid. 5:17:4.

(2) St. Cyril Of Jerusalem: Catech. Lect. 13:28.

(3) St. Athanasius: De Incarn. 25:4.

# TYPES OF CROSSES

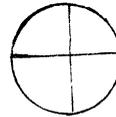
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It is no wonder that more than four hundred various types of crosses are in existence<sup>(1)</sup> for the cross was known from the prehistoric age among the pagans as a sacred emblem and a source of life, perhaps received by oral tradition. The Jews also knew certain types of the cross, as a shadow of the Lord's Cross. To the Christians, the Cross represents a vital theological truth, as the redeeming power of the Crucified Christ, a sign of the cosmic scope redemption and as an object of the Lord's Parousi (His Last advent).

Now, I will give some examples of these types; known to the Pagans Jews and Christians.

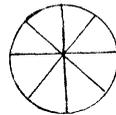
## 1. CROSSES IN THE STONE AGE

This Cross (Figure 1) was found in a circle and represents a solar wheel on a sacred stone. The ancient world looks to the sun as the Life-giving God; here the Cross is its salvation sign.



*figure 1*

We find the same thing in the Buddhistic and in Chaldean contexts, that is, the double Cross in the circle represents Sky-god (Figure 2).



*fig. 2*

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<sup>(1)</sup> Rest: Our Christian Symbols, 1954.

## 2. CROSSES At 4000 BC

Various types of the Cross as religious signs referring to 4000 BC were found in the Near East; such as Figure 3 (which refers to eternity) and Figure 4 (which was found on pottery)



*fig. 3*



*fig. 4*

## 3. THE SWASTIKA

This type refers to the Sun and was used for “good luck”. The term “Swastika” is composed of two sakrit (ancient Indian language) words:

‘su’ means ‘good’,  
‘asti’ means ‘being’,  
with the suffix ‘k’ it means, ‘it is good’ or, ‘so be it’.

It was found on archaic vases and pottery in India, Persia, China, Italy, Greece and Cyprus; on ancient bronze ornaments in England, France and Etruria<sup>(1)</sup>, on weapons and various ornaments in

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<sup>(1)</sup> Etruria is some ancient countries at the west of Italy

Germany and Scandinavia; on Celtic<sup>(1)</sup> crosses in Ireland and Scotland; and in prehistoric burial grounds in Scandinavia, Mexico, Peru<sup>(2)</sup> and United States<sup>(3)</sup>. (Figure. 5)

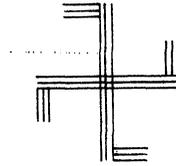


fig. 5

#### 4. THE TREE OF LIFE

The Tree of Life, well known among the Pagans, often took the shape of the Cross, especially the Tau ( T ) Cross, as we show in the Figure 6.

The Idea of the tree of life started in the days of Adam, the first man, as a symbol of Christ, the Life-giving One.

Man found in the tree the symbolism of the life of the cosmos because of its consistency, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. He often drew it with two branches through which birds and animals are protected. (Figure 6).

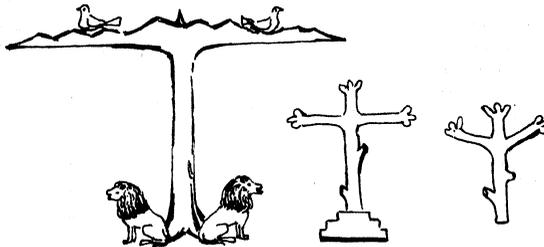


fig. 6

(1) The Celts are from Indian European origin dwelt on Western Europe especially Ireland, Scotland, Wales etc.

(2) Goldsmith: Ancient Pagan Symbols 1929 p. 39.

(3) At south America .

The Egyptians supposed that in the East of heaven, stand high sycamore trees. “Is-ik-amour” means the light of the Sun fire, upon which the gods sit; the Tree of Life by which the gods live; where fruits also feed the blessed.<sup>(1)</sup>

The first Spanish missionaries in Mexico found to their amazement that the Cross was already in use there, as a symbol of the Tree Life.<sup>(2)</sup>

## 5. PHARAOH’S CROSS

It is found among the most sacred hieroglyphics of Egypt called the “Ansat Cross” the “Sign of Onkh” (wnz) ie. sign of Life the key of the Nile; implied as the “life of come”.<sup>(3)</sup> The Copts as the sons of the Pharaohs adopted this type of Cross (Figure 7).



Fig 7

## 6. THE TAU CROSS

The Tau Cross is shaped like the Greek letter “Tau”, representing the first letter of the word “Theos” meaning God.<sup>(4)</sup>

The letter “T” or “Tau” has an Egyptian origin, for the ancient Egyptians assumed the earth to have been created by the word of the God “Thuat”<sup>(5)</sup>. For this reason they called their first month of the “Thaut”, as we see in the Coptic calendar.

It is said that the T-shape is derived from the shape of the mouth while the tongue is put out, as in Figure 8. It is

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(1) Goldsmith, p. 39.

(2) Bible Folklore, p.243.

(3) Goldsmith: p. 39.

(4) Ferguson G. : Signs & Symbols in Christian Art, N.Y. 1955, p.270.

(5) Bayley H. : Last Language of Symbolism, 1951, vol 2, p.127

remarked that in Mexico the tongue protruding from the mouth was the symbol of wisdom. Thus, the ancient Mexicans considered the TAU Cross as a divine symbol and called it the Tree of Life, Tree of our Flesh and the Tree of Nutriment. It was later considered by them as the “god of rain” <sup>(1)</sup>.

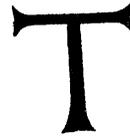


Fig. 8

According to tradition, the blood on the Jewish door posts to save the first-born from the destroying Angel, formed this type of Cross <sup>(2)</sup>.

## 7. THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Tradition relates that the type of Cross upon which Moses lifted the brazen serpent was the T-shaped Cross. It is sometimes called the Anticipatory Cross (Number 21:8,9; John 3:14).

It is sometimes attributed to St. Phillip, who, according to one version of his martyrdom, was crucified on a cross of this type <sup>(3)</sup>.

In the west, it is called, “St. Anthony’s Cross”, as an emblem of St. Anthony of Egypt <sup>(4)</sup>. It is probable, so, that the Egyptian order of monks carried it as the head of the staves,

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<sup>(1)</sup> Goldsmith: Ancient Pagan Symbols

<sup>(2)</sup> Rest. P. 19.

<sup>(3)</sup> Ferguson P. 296

<sup>(4)</sup> Child & Colles : Christian Symbols, p. 16.

which they used through their long prayers and to help them in walking on the sand of the desert. (Figure 9)



Fig. 9

## 8. THE DISGUISED CROSS

As early Christians, during the persecution, were forbidden to display the Cross in its usual form, they disguised it in the form of an anchor <sup>(1)</sup>, trident, the Greek letter “T”, or in the form of the cryptogram based on the Greek initials of Christ ( ). Sometimes the Christians drew the cross in the form of fish. (Figure 10)

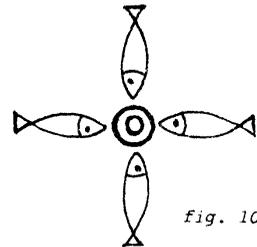


Fig. 10

### A. THE ANCHOR

The anchor was frequently found in the catacombs of ancient Rome, and was carved on old Christian gems, as a symbol of hope and immortality. (Heb. 6:19). (Figure 11).



Fig. 11

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<sup>(1)</sup> Gough M.: Early Christians, London 1961,p. 86-7.

## B. THE ANCHOR WITH ALPHA AND OMEGA

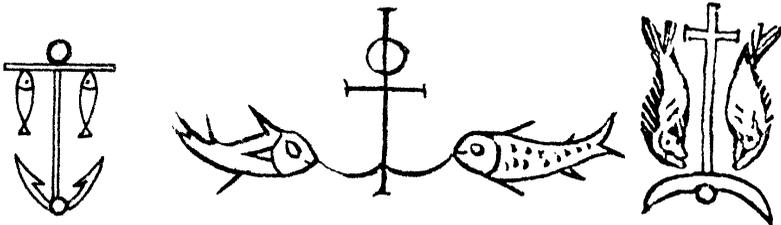
This symbol represents the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. It is a symbol of the Lord's divinity; the One who is the First and the last, One who is All-powerful, and Omnipotent. (Figure 12).



*fig. 12*

## C. AN ANCHOR WITH FISHES

Often the fish symbolises God's people. Thus Figure 13 represents the people of the Old Testament, and those of New Testament. All depend on the Cross, the source of all their hope.



*fig. 13*

## D. THE ANCHOR CROSS

Sometimes the anchor was not used as a disguised cross, but the Cross appears clearly combined with the anchor. (Figure 14).

## E. THE FISHES

In Figure 10, the faithful, in the shape of a Cross are approaching the Bread of Life, as if their suffering with Christ is correlated with their spiritual food.



fig. 14



fig. 15



fig. 16



fig. 17



fig. 21



fig. 18



fig. 19



fig. 20



## 9. THE MONOGRAM

We have already seen that the early Christians disguised the Cross in the form of a cryptogram based on the first two letters (X,P) of the Greek word (XRISTOS) which means “Christ”. However, there was another cause for using the monogram, for it was constantly used, not only in the catacombs but also in the inscriptions and all the earliest records, as if the early Church would not separate the Cross from Christ’s Name. The Cross according to the early Christians represented Christ’s person.

There were many types of the monogram such as:

- a. Figure 15 is the earliest form of the monogram.
- b. Figure 16 was introduced soon after the letter ‘X’ was turned so as to make its arms vertical and horizontal in the shape of the Cross.

Both types are found on coins of Constantine’s reign.

Figure 17 is a later form of the monogram, being a combination of figures 15 and 16.

- c. Figure 18 is found on the coins of Constantine, the Alpha and Omega are on both sides of the monogram to assure Christ’s divinity.
- d. In Figure 19 the monogram is enclosed in a circle, a symbol of eternity, or standing upon a circle, a

symbol of the conquering power of Christ over the world.<sup>(1)</sup>

e. Figure 20 found at the catacomb of St. Callistus in Rome; it represents a Christian epitaph, which tells us that the departed person was a Christian person who had been signed on the forehead with Chrism in the form of ✱ **XRISTOS**, and therefore received the gift of the Holy Spirit, here symbolised by the dove.<sup>(2)</sup>

f. **CONSTANTINE CROSS.** This is one of the familiar monograms, that appeared to Constantine on 312 A.D. in the sky, outshining the sun in its splendour. Constantine immediately knew what the “Cross-monogram” meant and consequently removed the old Roman eagle from the standards of the legions, placing in stead the sacred monogram.<sup>(1)</sup>

This monogram sometimes termed ‘Chrisma’ or erroneously Constantine ‘Laborum’. The Laborum is not the monogram itself, but a standard marked with the monogram (Figure 21).

g. Figure 22 can be interpreted as the two Greek initials of Jesus Christ (IHS XRISTOS) being interwoven.



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(1) Hulme: Symbolism in Christian Art, London 1908, p. 49.

(2) Cyril E. Pocknee: Cross & Crucifix.

(1) Hulme, p.47.

**h.** It has been found that in the catacombs and graves of martyrs, the monogram was surrounded by a wreath, the symbol victory through Jesus Christ.

**i.** In Greek art, representations of the cross are often accompanied by the inscription IC XC NI KA, which means, “Jesus Christ the Conqueror”, or in a still more abbreviated form XP, NI on either side. (Figure 23).



**j.** In Coptic art, the cross is sometimes accompanied by the letter [which means the Conqueror, or by the inscription IBC P, C) the initials of Jesus Christ.

**k.** At the top of the cross, there is the Latin inscription *INRI* (Figure 24). They are the initials of the Latin words, “Jesus Nazaranus Rex Judaeorum”, which means “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jew”. According to St. John 19:19, this title was written by Pilate in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and was placed on the cross of Christ.



## 10. ST. ANDREW'S CROSS

This type of Cross (Figure 25) is attributed to St. Andrew, who on his condemnation, requested to be nailed to a cross of different form from that of Christ's Cross in true humility, he believed that even in martyrdom, he was unworthy to approach the likeness of his Saviour. St. Andrew's cross has, therefore, become a symbol of humility in suffering.<sup>(1)</sup>



Fig. 25

It came into use in the Western Church during the middle ages is also, the national cross of Scotland.

## 11. ST. PETER'S CROSS

St. Peter the Apostle, also refused to be crucified on a cross of the same form of his Saviour. He asked his persecutors to crucify him head down (Figure 26).

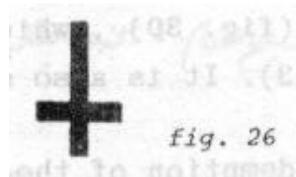


fig. 26

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ferguson, p. 295 - 6.

## 12. ST. PHILIP'S CROSS

St. Philip was crucified in a lying position. (Figure 27).



*fig. 27*

## 13. THE LATIN CROSS

This has the upright of greater length than the transverse limb. (Figure 28).



*fig. 28*

## 14. THE PASSION CROSS

This is a Latin cross, its members are pointed at the ends, in which case, it is understood to set forth the suffering of the Lord. It is also called the Pointed Cross, and the Cross of Suffering. (Figure 29).



*fig. 29*

## 15. THE CALVARY CROSS

A Latin Cross stands on three steps (Figure 30), which represents faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:31). It is also called the Graded Cross.

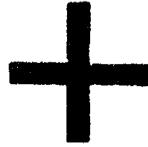


*fig. 30*

It symbolises the Realisation of the redemption of the Risen Christ, who reigns from His Throne in Heaven

## 16. THE GREEK CROSS

This cross has four arms equal in length. It symbolises Christianity which spreads its blessings and redeeming messages over the four corners of the earth (Figure 31).<sup>(1)</sup>

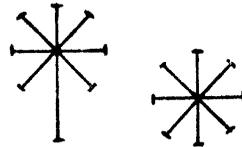


*fig. 31*

## 17. OTHER CREEK CROSSES

Figure 32 represents two Creek “double Crosses” from the fourth century.

*fig. 32*



## 18. THE GAMMADIA CROSS

This cross is also called the Voided Cross, and is composed of four Greek Gamma ( G ), which symbolises Christ as the Corner Stone of the Church. It is frequently seen on the vestments of the Greek Orthodox Church. (Figure 33).



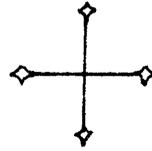
*fig. 33*

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<sup>(1)</sup> Sidney Heath, p. 105.

## 19. THE ARMENIAN CROSS

As in Figure 34 this cross refers to spreading the blessings of the Cross over the whole world.



*fig. 34*

## 20. THE RUSSIAN CROSS

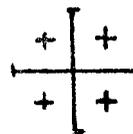
This cross has three cross beams (see Figure 35). The upper horizontal arm for the inscription over the head of the Crucified Christ; the lower slanting arm to provide for the nailing of Christ's feet. The Russians believe that Jesus was crucified with His feet side by side and not crossed over one another as usually pictured by the Western Church.



*fig. 35*

## 21. THE JERUSALEM CROSS

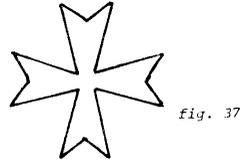
It has four small crosses between the arms (Figure 36), which indicate the four corners of the world to which missionaries of the Cross have carried the Gospel; since the day of the Church of Jerusalem, which is here represented by the large Cross. The five crosses symbolise the five wounds of the Lord.



*fig. 36*

## 22. THE MALTESE CROSS

This cross is called the eight-pointed cross (Figure 37), for it is composed of four arms of equal length, with each arm ending with two points. These ends refer to the eight beatitudes mentioned in Mt. 5:3-10.



It dates back to the days of the Crusades, as the Hospitallers used it for their emblem. Later they made their headquarters on the Island of Malta.

## 23. THE PATTEE CROSS

This cross resembles the Maltese Cross, however it differs from the Maltese one by its curved radiating lines (Figure 38).

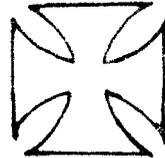


fig. 38

## 24. THE POTENT CROSS

This cross is formed of four Tau Crosses. (Figure 39).

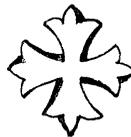
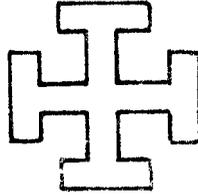


fig. 39

## 25. THE PATONCE CROSS

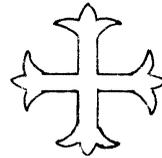
The arms are carved and spread out as they radiate from the centre. (Figure 40).



*fig. 40*

## 26. CROSS FLEURE (FLEURIE, FLEURY OR FLORETTY)

This cross has four straight arms of equal length, with pointed petal - like ends, that is, as triple leafed character. (see Figure 41).



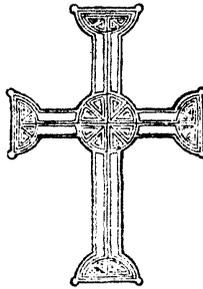
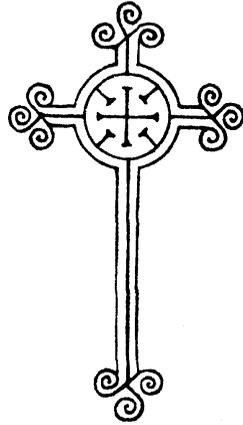
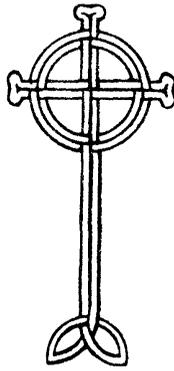
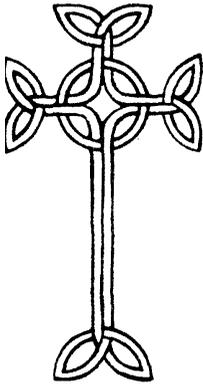
*fig. 41*

## 27. CELTIC CROSSES

They are called the Irish crosses, the Crosses of Iona, or wheel crosses. They have a circle which signifies eternity (see Figure 42). It is often interpreted as symbolising the continuity of life victorious over the instruments of death. For this reason these types of crosses are often placed on graves. It was said to have been taken from what is now Ireland to the Island of Iona by Columbas in the 6th century <sup>(1)</sup>.

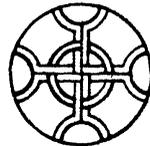
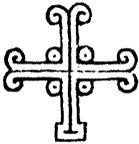
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<sup>(1)</sup> Stuler S. : Illustrated Bible & Church Handbook, N.Y. 1966, p. 279.



CELTIC CROSSES

Fig. 42



## 28. THE CROSS OF TRIUMPH

This cross symbolises the triumph of the Gospel throughout the earth. (Figure 43).



fig. 43

## 29. THE CROWN AND THE CROSS

These symbolise the reward of the faithful in the world to come, as seen in Figure 44. Those who believe in, and who have served the Crucified Lord. “Be you faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life”. (Rev. 2:10).



fig. 44

## 30. THE CROSS AND THE TRIANGLE

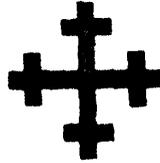
This is a symbol used mostly in Western Church embroidery. The Cross is intertwined with the triangle (Figure 45), and emphasises that Jesus Christ is one of the Holy Trinity.



fig. 45

### 31. THE CROSS CROSSLET

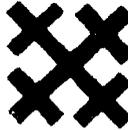
It consists of four Latin crosses joined at their bases (Figure 46). It suggests the spread of Christianity to the four corners of the earth.



*fig. 46*

### 32. ST. JULIAN'S CROSS

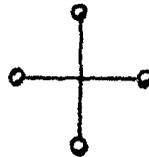
This is a cross set with slanted limbs (Figure 47).



*fig. 47*

### 33. CROSS POMMEE

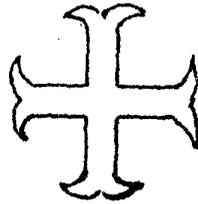
This cross has arms terminating in balls or circles (Figure 48).



*fig. 48*

### 34. THE MOLINE CROSS

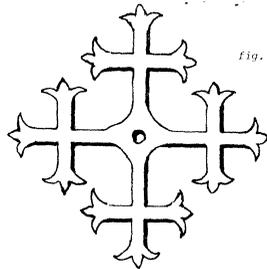
This cross has the edges of its arms divided into two curved members (Figure 49).



*fig. 49*

### 35. THE TRINITY CROSS

Every arm represents a fleuree cross (Figure 50).



*fig. 50*

### 36. THE RAINBOW CROSS

It is a symbol of peace and reconciliation (Figure 51).



*fig. 51*

### **37. THE PATRIARCHAL CROSS**

This cross has two horizontal arms, the upper one slightly shorter than the lower one. It is used in the Catholic patriarchal processions (Figure 52).



*fig. 52*

### **38. THE ROMAN PAPAL CROSS**

This cross has three horizontal arms, each a little longer than the other in descending order. It is said that the two upper cross bars signify the crosses of the two crucified thieves beside the Lord (Figure 53).

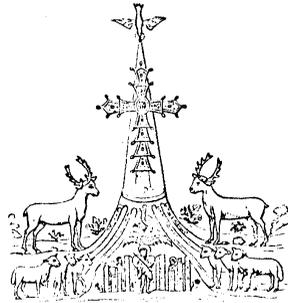


*fig. 53*

### **39. THE LATERAN CROSS**

This cross refers to the time of Constantine. The Original cross was in mosaic, restored by Nicolas III.

It is a plain cross flattened and has widening extremities. At the intersection there is a medallion of the Lord's Baptism. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove with the nimbus, hovers above, and from Him seems to proceed the baptismal fountain, which at the foot of the cross becomes the source of the four rivers: Gihon, Pison, Tigrus and Euphrates. Between the rivers is the City of God, guarded by the Angel, behind whom springs up a palm tree on which sits the phoenix with nimbus, as a symbol of the Risen Christ. Two stages below, near the waters, is a representation of pagans, seeking baptism, and three sheep on each side represent the churches (Figure 54).



*fig. 54*

Between the rivers is the City of God, guarded by the Angel, behind whom springs up a palm tree on which sits the phoenix with nimbus, as a symbol of the Risen Christ. Two stages below, near the waters, is a representation of pagans, seeking baptism, and three sheep on each side represent the churches (Figure 54).

#### **40. THE COPTIC CROSSES**

We here mention some examples of crosses found in the Coptic monuments:

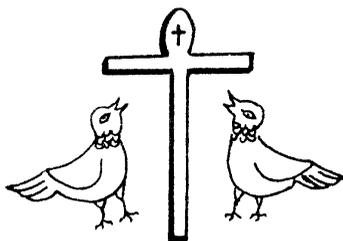
**a.** Figure 55 is a carved stone from the fifth century, now in the Louvre.



*fig. 55*

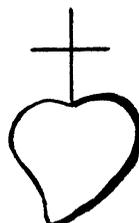
The Coptic ‘Anaste Cross’ is closely related to the ‘anch’ (sign of life) of the ancient Egyptians. The laurel crown around the cross symbolises eternal life and the Alpha and Omega refer to the divinity of the Crucified Lord.

**b.** Figure 56 is a Coptic Ansate Cross with two birds on either side. It represents the people of the Old and New Testaments, looking to the Cross as their source of life, salvation and hope.



*fig. 56*

**c.** Figure 57 was found at first on houses of Egypt and became the symbol of the adoration of the sacred heart in the Catholic Church.<sup>(1)</sup>

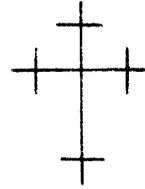


*fig. 57*

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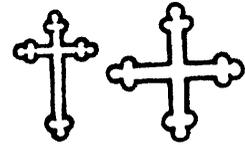
<sup>(1)</sup> Johannes Trayer: *The Cross As Symbol and Ornament*. Philadelphia 1961, p. 60.

**d.** In Figure 58 every edge is tri-winged as symbol of the Holy Trinity. The total of twelve wings represents the twelve Disciples of the Lord, or the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity in corners of the world



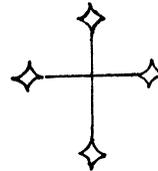
*fig. 58*

**e.** The Trefoil Cross (Figure 59) is called also the Cross Botonnee or Cross Treflee, and has the extremities of its arms ornamented with trefoils. This type is also used by the Byzantine Church.



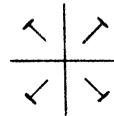
*fig. 59*

**f.** Figure 60 is in the form of Byzantine, which is found in the decorations of the ancient Coptic iconostasises.



*fig. 60*

**g.** Figure 61 represents the crucifixion it consists of the Cross and the nails.



*fig. 61*

## OTHER CROSSES

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### 1. THE PROCESSIONAL CROSS

Socrates<sup>(1)</sup>, the church historian, mentions concerning Processional Crosses, that there were presented by the Empress Eudoxia to the church, and was used by St. John Chrysostom in the nocturnal processional of the hymn singing, and as an action performed in contrast to that of the Arians.

The Coptic Church uses a gold plated or silver processional cross with a long hand; it is carried by a deacon. Behind this deacon two other deacons hold two silver or gold plated fans, in every church procession, that is, on the entrance of the bishop or on festival celebration.

It is important to note that often on processional crosses, the Crucified Christ is carved on one side and the Risen Christ on the second side. When the procession moves around inside the church, the deacon on the third turn shows the second side as if the church is rejoicing about the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.

The fans bear a shape of the Cherub, so that in every procession, the two fans represent the participation of the heavenly creatures in our spiritual joy.

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<sup>(1)</sup> PG. 67 : 689.

## **2. THE GOLDEN SERPENT**

On celebrating the Liturgy of Eucharist, if a bishop is present, then a deacon bears the bishop's staff, which is surmounted by a golden cross between two golden serpents. This staff is different from the pastoral staff, in that the bishop uses it all the time as a sign of his apostolic pastorship.

## **3. THE PECTORAL CROSS**

The words' *'Pectoral* and *Encolpin'* mean "*on the breast*".

The custom of wearing a cross on the breast, suspended by a cord or chain around the neck, appears to have been known since the fourth century. They were frequently worn, not only by church leaders but also by devote laymen.

Around 350 AD, Makrina, the saintly sister of St. Gregory of Nyssa, wore a small cross as a protection. "The Cross is the mark of the believer and the terror of demons". says St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

St. Chrysostom mentions the original custom of the pectoral cross being worn by many Christians as a portable reliquary.

It is now customary for the Orthodox Bishops and priests to wear a pectoral or *ENCOLPIN*, that is, an oval medallion with pictures of our Lord and St. Mary on it.

# **CHAPTER 12**

## **SACRED VESSELS**

## **SACRED VESSELS**

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God, as the loving Heavenly Father, who created the whole world on our behalf, asked Moses to offer some articles to be used in His House, being aware that they really belonged to God. He ordered him to anoint not only the Tabernacle but also the ark of testimony, the table and its utensils, the lampstand and its utensils, the altar of incense and so on, all with sacred ointment saying to him, “You shall consecrate them that they may be most Holy, whatever touches them will become Holy”. (Exod. 30:29).

The Church of the New Testament, as Christ’s Bride, offers several special vessels to be used in God’s House, being aware they are God’s own. They are consecrated by prayers, the word of God and by crossing them by the anointment of Chrism. When consecrated, they are only to be used for God’s service.

### **1. THE CHALICE**

The Communion Cup, into which wine mixed with water is poured, is consecrated into the Blood of the Lord through the Liturgy of Eucharist. The Lord Himself used the chalice (Mt. 26:26, 27) and the Apostles imitated Him. St. Paul the Apostle calls it “the Cup of Blessing” and “the Cup of the Lord”. (1Cor. 10:16,21).

Tertullian<sup>(1)</sup> refers to it as having the shape of lamb engraved outside it, to remind us of the Lamb of God Who purchased His Church and adorned her entirely with His Holy Blood.

## **THE CHALICE OF THE LAST SUPPER**

The Chalice used by our Lord Jesus Christ for the wine at the institution of the Eucharist may reasonably be supposed to have been one of the ordinary two handled cups in use at that time<sup>(2)</sup>.

“Bede”, the church historian relates that in the seventh century they exhibited at Jerusalem a great Silver Cup, with two handles, which our Saviour Himself had used in celebrating the Eucharist, however antiquity knows nothing of this chalice and it has no claim to be regarded as the genuine cup used by Christ<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Cathedral at Valencia, Spain, has in its treasury what has been claimed to be the Lord’s Chalice, used at the Last Supper, yet archaeologists feel that evidence does not satisfy all the requirements of historical criticism<sup>(4)</sup>.

In discussing the Chalice which the Lord used at the Last Supper, it is necessary to mention a treasure discovered in the valley of Orontes, not far from Antioch in Syria in 1910, it

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(1) Tertul. : On Chastity

(2) Watts : Catalogue, of Chalices, 1922, p. 1.

(3) Hallett: A Catholic Dictionary, 135.

(4) Davies: Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship, p.126.

is now in New York. It comprises two chalices, three book covers, a large cross and many crumpled fragments of silver. The most important piece is a silver chalice, almost eight inches high. The bowl has a truncate round form, the knob and foot are small in proportion. The bowl is encased in open work, decorated with vines and grapes, where are seated figures representing our Lord and ten Apostles. To the right of the Lord is the Lamb with its head turned back towards him. The star of Bethlehem shines over Christ's extended right hand. A dove over Christ's head represents the Holy Spirit<sup>(1)</sup>.

The wonder of this is that the other simple Chalice of very poor material is found inside this precious Chalice. This has caused Dr. Eisen, who has devoted many years to research about these Chalices, to believe that this poor one is that which the Lord used. For why should a precious one be used just as a cover for the very simple one, unless it had some special meaning?!

## **CHALICE MATERIAL**

The Early Christian Chalices were commonly made from wood or glass. St. Epiphanius in condemning the priests says, "Ancient priests used wooden Chalices while themselves were like the gold, now they use golden Chalices but they are like the wood".<sup>(2)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> G.A. Eisen: Preliminary report on the Great Chalice of Antioch, in American Journal of Archiology. 2<sup>nd</sup>.Series 20, p.426-437. Atiya, p.233

<sup>(2)</sup> Watts: Catalogue of Chalices.

By the third and fourth centuries, precious metals became common, and valuable chalices of Gold and silver set with jewels, were offered by believers as a sign of their love. Many Fathers asked their people not to exaggerate in offering these valuable vessels while there were many people in dire need.

St. Clement of Alexandria vigorously opposed using gold and precious stones. St. John Chrysostom and St. Ambrose condemned the donors of jewelled gold Chalices.

Although we hear that Coptic priests and deacons were martyred because of their refusal to give the church vessels to their persecutors, some Fathers sold the precious church vessels to feed the poor. St. Ambrose recalls that Lawrence sold his church vessels and distributed the proceeds to the poor; while he himself did not hesitate to convert the treasures of Milan into money for the purpose of ransoming captives. St. Jerome refers approvingly to the example of Exupere, Bishop of Toulouse, who sold his church vessels in order to assist the poor.<sup>(1)</sup>

## THE SHAPE OF THE COPTIC CHALICE

The bowl of the Coptic Chalice has a bell-shaped form, the stem is long and rests on a circular stand



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<sup>(1)</sup> Watts, p. 5, 6.

## **WITHDRAWAL OF CHALICE FROM THE LAITY**

In Western Christendom, the gradual withdrawal of the Chalice from the laity began in the twelfth century, which was officially confirmed by the council of Constance in 1415. Prior to this action, two kinds of Chalices were in common use.

**Firstly;** the Chalice of consecration which was used by the celebrant on the Altar.

**Secondly;** the ministerial Chalice, which was used for the communion of the faithful, this was known as the ‘Scyphus’.

Where the Chalice has not been withdrawn from the laity in the Orthodox Churches, one Chalice is used for both, the clergy and the laity. According to the Coptic rite, all the communicants are given the Body and Blood of Christ separately.

## **MIXED WINE**

According to the Coptic rite, wine is mixed with about one third water. The Syrians use half water and half wine. In the Greek Church the only rule appears to be that there is to be more wine than water in the Chalice.

It is noteworthy that the Lord consecrated, using mixed wine. The Early Church followed the same custom also<sup>(1)</sup>, for wine and water typify the Blood and water which flowed from

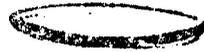
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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Justin: apology 65; St. Irenaeus: AD. Haer. 2, 3; St. Clem. Alex.: Paedag. 2:2:20.; St. Cyprian: Epistle 63:13.

the Saviour's pierced side. This mixture is changed into the true blood of Christ, while at the same time it typifies the indissoluble union between Christ (wine) and His people (water).<sup>(1)</sup>

## 2. THE PATEN

It is called in the Coptic 'tclckc', and in Greek 'disxos', a small round tray, without a stand and having no engraving. It is usually made of silver or gold.



It is said that the Church of Lorenzo, Genoa, possesses the dish used by the Lord at the Last Supper for the consecrated bread. It is a shallow glass bowl hexagonal in shape, with two small handles, made of deep green emerald<sup>(2)</sup>. As was with the Chalice, evidence does not satisfy all the requirement of historical criticism.

Some people believe that the Lord did not use a paten, but rather consecrated the bread upon His hand. However, as the Liturgy takes time, the church prefers to use the paten in order that the bread is not held for too long a time in the celebrant's hand. This paten has a symbolic meaning, as it represents the Lord's manger and tomb.

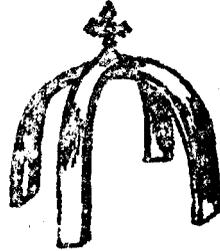
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<sup>(1)</sup> St. Cyprian: Epistle 63:13.

<sup>(2)</sup> Davies, p.128.

### 3. THE DOME (STAR)

It is called in Arabic “Dome” and in Greek “asthr” or “astrixos”(asterisk), and consists of two silver arched bands, held by a screw, crossed over each other into the shape of a cross, usually surmounted by a small cross.



It is said that St. John Chrysostom had introduced this article, which is placed upon the paten to keep the holy bread in a prescribed order, and to support the coverings.

It represents the shape of the tomb and also reminds us of the star that appeared to the Wisemen.

### 4. THE SPOON

The Spoon in Coptic is called “pim/yt/r” and in Greek “labij”. In it the Blood of Christ is administered to the communicants.



It is said that in early centuries the celebrant used to put the Body in the hands of the communicants or in the mouths,

and the Blood was drunk directly from the Chalice. Only in the sixth century was the Spoon (Mysterion) used.

## 5. THE CRUETS

Cruets are two vessels used in holding the wine and water for the Eucharist. They are mentioned in the inventory of gifts made by Constantine to the Churches of Rome<sup>(1)</sup>.

There are three other cruets used by the Coptic Church, they are as follows:

**Firstly;** one is used to hold the Chrism (Myron), the sacred cruet which only the priest or bishop can hold. It is usually preserved in the Sanctuary, and sometimes on the Altar<sup>(2)</sup>.

**Secondly;** a cruet contains the Oil of “Kallilion” or “Gallilion”, used in the liturgy of Baptism.

**Thirdly;** a cruet contains the oil Of “Apoclypsis”, that is the Oil which is used on the last Friday of the Great Lent (in the service of the Sick); and is used in the service of the Saturday of Joy (before Easter) when all the book of Revelation (Apocalypse) is read.

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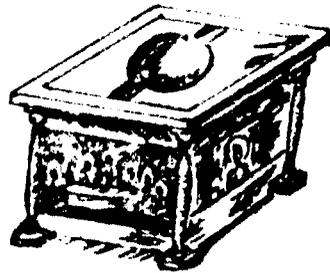
(1) Hallett, p.235

(2) Khs - Burmester The Egyptian Or Coptic Church.

At the Coptic Church of St. Shenouda at Old Cairo, there is an ancient wooden box. It is circular and has three round holes which are probably for the three above mentioned cruets.

## 6. THE ARK

In the middle of the Alter, there is a wooden box, called in Coptic 'pitotc' which means 'a seat' or 'a throne', and is used as a Chalice-Stand.



Usually it is cubicle in shape, about thirty centimetres high and twenty-five centimetres wide, the top is closed with high flaps. The beautiful carving is inlaid with ebony and ivory and is decorated with four small icons.

### TITLES OF THE ARK

It is called 'the Throne' for it represents the presence of the Crucified Lord.

It is also called 'the Ark', as it looks like the Ark of Noah through which the creature where saved. We are also saved by the Blood of the New Testament which is in the Chalice of this Ark.

Its name also corresponds to the ‘Ark of the Old Testament’, for the last one contains the following articles:

**Firstly**, the Tablets of Law written with the finger of God to declare God’s covenant with man. The new Ark now contains the true Blood of Christ, as the New covenant, that fulfils the Law and the prophets.

**Secondly**, Aaron’s rod which flowered, as a symbol of the Virgin Mary who begot the Incarnate Lord, whose Blood is in this new Ark.

**Thirdly**, the jar of manna, as a symbol of the true Manna, the Life-giving Body and Blood of Christ. (John 6).

## **7. THE CIBORIUM**

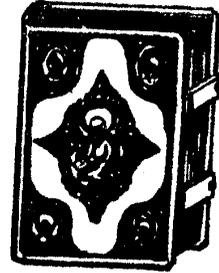
The Ciborium or the Antophorion is a small vessel of silver, circular in shape and having a cover, with measures about six centimetres in diameter. Its height is about six centimetres. Its purpose is to convey the Holy Body moistened with a few drops of the precious Blood to the sick or prisoners, or to any person who cannot attend the divine liturgy and partake in the ceremony. However, this vessel is not used to preserve the Holy Communion for any other time than that required, for the Coptic Church rules forbid this custom.

In particular circumstances, when the priest has to be late in holding this vessel to communicate a person, he places it on the Alter, kindles a candle and a deacon wearing his service

vestments guards. According to the historian Renaudt, in his speech about Patriarch Philothius (63<sup>rd</sup>.): the Patriarch states that vessel holding the Holy Elements must be guarded by a priest.

## 8. THE BOOK OF GOSPEL

A copy of the New Testament covered with silver or gold and decorated by icons, has in the middle of one side, the icon of the Resurrection or Crucifixion and the other side, there is the icon of the Patron Saint or St. Mary and the Child Jesus. Sometimes on the corners, there are the four Evangelists with their symbols.<sup>(1)</sup>



## 9. THE LITURGICAL FANS

In Latin ‘flabellum’ and in Greek ripdion, ripin or ‘εκαπτηγον’ (hexa-ptergion) means ‘six-winged’, because the figure of the six-winged Seraph usually appears on it.

The use of the liturgical fans during the consecration continued in the West until the fourteenth century<sup>(2)</sup>, and has continued until now in some churches of Egypt, especially Upper Egypt.

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<sup>(1)</sup> See page

<sup>(2)</sup> Oxford Dictionary..., p. 502.

According to the Apostolic Constitution of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, two deacons using fans of linen, fine skin or peacocks' feathers stand by the Altar to drive away insects and keep them from touching the sacred vessels. These fans now have a symbolic meaning. According to the Coptic rite, these fans are used during the recitation of the Seraphim's hymn as a sign of the presence of the Seraphim to participate with us in our praise to God.

According to a Coptic manuscript in the Vatican, twelve deacons carry fans during the procession for the consecration of the Chrism<sup>(1)</sup>. In the Greek Church seven deacons wave seven liturgical fan in the service of Good Friday and in consecrating the Chrism.

It is interesting to note that some Orthodox Churches attached small bells in fans to give a sound on their waving, as a sign of the sound of the Seraphim's flying wings around the Glorified Christ.

In the Coptic Church there are now only two metal fans in the form of a circle, somewhat like a halo around a saint's head. Each fan has a long handle and in the middle of the circle a Seraph is represented. These fans are used in the church processions.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Butler, vol. 2, p. 50.

## 10. CENSER AND CENSING

Under the Old Testament dispensation, the use of incense in divine worship was prescribed by God and controlled by the most Strict Regulation (Exod. 30:34-38). It was one of those ceremonies which belonged to the highly ceremonial rituals of Judaism; which took place within the holy place, and was upheld by the priest alone.

### CENSING IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

The Fathers of the first three centuries used severe language against the use of incense in public worship<sup>(1)</sup>. According to the pagan worship, censuring had seven religious uses:<sup>(2)</sup>

1. As a sacrifice to the gods.
2. As a sacrifice to the shades of a deceased being.
3. As a symbol of honour to living persons, especially the Emperors.
4. As a demonifuge, to drive away evil spirits, whether from the living or from the dead.
5. As a means of purification or healing.
6. As a festive accompaniment for processions and similar ceremonies.
7. Simply to create a worshipful atmosphere.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Justine: Apology 1:12; Tertul. : Apology 41, 42, 30; Clem Alex. Paedeg Lib. 2J. Origen : in Levit, Hom 12; Exhort. Ad Martyr 45.

<sup>(2)</sup> Davies, p. 197.

A Christian who wanted to maintain his life, had to offer incense before the statues of gods or before the Emperor; failing to do so, meant a certain death.

## CENSING IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

It is difficult to believe that Constantine's gifts of censers were to have a sudden alteration in the Church idea of censuring<sup>(1)</sup>. These gifts assume that censuring in Christian worship was established. Egeria ( Etheria ) the nun, in her pilgrimage in the fourth century adhered to burning incense in the service of the Easter at Jerusalem.

St. Basil, in his speech, said, "The houses of prayer" were thrown down by the hands of the ungodly, and the alters overturned, and there was no oblation, nor incense, nor a place of offering"<sup>(2)</sup>

St Ephram the Syrian in his speech about the effect of the Christian worship, says<sup>(3)</sup>.

"Your fasts are a defence for our land;  
your prayers are a shield for our city;  
the burning of incense is our propitiation  
Praise to God who has hallowed your offerings!"

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<sup>(1)</sup> E.G. Atchlev : A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship.

<sup>(2)</sup> P.G. 30 : 496 Hom in Gorduim Martyrem 2.

<sup>(3)</sup> Cormina Nisibena 17:37; St. Chrys. : Com. On Mat. Hom 98:4.

## **CENSING IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIPING**

One of the first gifts offered to Christ while He was yet an infant, was the frankincense, a costly gift of love which should be offered to Him by His people today<sup>(1)</sup>. The prophets of the Old Testament, foreseeing the glory of the Church in the abandoned access to her of the Gentiles, says, “The forces of Gentiles shall come unto you... they shall bring gold and incense and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord” (Isa. 60:5, 6). “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, My Name shall be great among the Gentiles, and in every place incense shall be offered unto My Name, and a pure offering...” (Malachi 1:10, 11).

Even in Heavenly worship, St. John the Divine, so incense being burned by an angle in a gold censer (Revelation 8:3, 4).

## **SYMBOLISM OF CENSING**

1. Censing is a symbol of the Presence of God among his people, when we smell it we deeply say, “While the King was on His couch my hand gave forth its fragrance” (Cant. 1:12).

2. It symbolises praying (Exod. 30:1 - 8) as a sacrifice of love. According to the Coptic rite, liturgies of Eucharist,

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<sup>(1)</sup> Incense & Ritualism in the Church of England (Theol. Pamph vol. 72)

Baptism, Healing, Marriage, Funerals are correlated with this sacrifice of love.

In the fourth century, St. Chrysostom in his homily on St. Palagia of Antioch, alludes to the use of incense of the Funeral procession<sup>(1)</sup>, and the act of the “Martyrdom of St. Peter of Alexandria” (311 AD) mentions the same.<sup>(2)</sup>

**3.** Censing also symbolises the purification of people when God said to Moses, “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment, Moses said to Aaron: Take your censer and put therein from off the Altar, and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the Lord, the plague has begun...”

**4.** The burning of incense before persons and things is most honorific.

It is meant according to the Armenian rite of the ninth century that the priest who carries the Eucharist to the sick is preceded by a cross and a censer<sup>(3)</sup>. The same meaning is apparent incensing the Altar, the Gospel and the Bishop.

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(1) St. Chrys. Hom. 23:7.

(2) P. G. xviig: 465.

(3) F.G. Conybeare & A. G. Maclean: *Rituale Armenorum*. Oxford 1905 p.114.

The custom of censuring the bishops may have been derived from imperial usage, since it was customary for torches and incense to be carried before the Emperor<sup>(1)</sup>.

## **THE LITURGICAL ORDER OF CENSING**

According to the Coptic rite, burning incense has a strict order; the priest swings the thurible (censer) around the Altar and in front of the Sanctuary door, the Gospel, the sacred Icons and the bishop, then he kisses the hands of his fellow priests, descend with his censer amongst the worshippers, and finally returns to the Sanctuary: This order expresses the mysterious action that is accomplished through the liturgy. The priest begins by censuring the Altar, for through the merit of Christ's Blood, our offerings and prayers are accepted. He then gathers the prayers and blessings of the word of God (Gospel), bishops, deacons and all the congregation together with those of saints and returns to the Sanctuary to offer them on behalf of each one.

## **THE CENSER OR THURIBLE**

The thurible is a brass or silver vessel in the shape of a cup, in which incense is burned. In the usual form of the censer the container is suspended on three chains from which it can be swung during the incensation.

Anastasius, in his 'life of Gylvester' states that the Emperor Constantine presented two thuribles of pure gold,

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<sup>(1)</sup> Davies. p. 356.

weighing thirty pounds, to the Lateran Church as well as one of gold, set with gems for the baptistery.

In our church, the censer symbolises St. Mary who bore the “True coal burning with Fire”, that is the Incarnate Son of God. Its three chains remind us of the Holy Trinity who participated in the Incarnation of the Son. For the Father sent His Son, the Son obeyed, and the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin for the Incarnation of the Son.

## **11. OTHER ARTICLES**

1. A Small box for incense, usually of silver to carved wood.
2. The Ewer and Basin, are used for washing the hands of the celebrant during the liturgical services. They are usually made of bronze, but sometimes they are made of silver, and the ewer is sometimes a pitcher of clay.
3. The Qurban (oblation) - Basket is a small basket made from palm leaves in which the holy bread is placed, one of which the celebrant chooses as the ‘Lamb’. This basket is decorated with crosses and sometimes with strings of silver or gold.
4. Musical instruments: the Coptic hymns depend in the first place, on the natural instrument, I mean the throat. However we use some primitive instruments such as the triangle and the cymbals.

# **CHAPTER 13**

## **THE NAVE**

## **THE NAVE**

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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 nave by a screen or fence.

The Chancel is one to three steps higher than the nave. It contains seats for the deacons, two candelabra and two lecterns on which the Coptic and Arabic books of reading (lectionaries) are placed.

### **THE LECTERN**

The lectern is a moveable wooden desk, furnished with a sloping book rest. It is adorned with geometrical designs and is sometimes inlaid with ivory carvings. The finest example is one at the Old Cathedral in Cairo. It belongs to the ‘Suspended Church’; and may date perhaps from the tenth or eleventh century. It is a most beautiful work of art, the ivory enrichments

give it a most delicate appearance as a finished work of art. The crosses and tablets are clad with Arabic inscriptions they are solid blocks of ivory with the design relief<sup>(1)</sup>.

It is worth mentioning here that lecterns have been used in Eastern and Western Churches, when the ambons were not in existence, or when they are no longer in use.

## 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 people's meeting with God. For this reason the Sanctuary is called the Soul of the Church while the Nave is called the Body of the Church.

To this effect, Fr. Maximus the Confessor says<sup>(2)</sup> : "In the same way as the carnal and spiritual elements are united in man in such a way that neither the carnal elements swallows up the spiritual, nor does spiritual element dissolves the carnal, but it spiritualises it, so that the body itself becomes an expression of the spirit. Likewise, in a church, the Sanctuary and the Nave communicate with each other; the Sanctuary enlightens and guides the Nave and the latter thus becomes its visible

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(1) Butler: The Ancient Churches of Egypt.

(2) Mystagogia 2, P.G. 16:1668 dff.

expression. Such a relationship restores the normal order of the universe, which was turned upside down by the fall of man”.

## **THE DIVISIONS OF THE NAVE**

The Nave was normally divided into two parts by a colonnade. The southern aisle was reserved for the nuns, virgins, widows, women and their children. This aisle is now used without any division for all the female believers.

The northern aisle of the Nave is still reserved for men.

According to this order, children attend the liturgy with the whole congregation, with women sitting at the right hand of men, as the Queen is at the right hand of the King.

## **THE DOME**

1. Some Coptic Churches have one dome, called cupola. It resembles Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, who is seated in heaven. For this reason, it is usually painted with the Icon of the Lord or in a bright blue colour decorated with pictures of angels and stars..

2. Some churches have three cupolas, which represents the Holy Trinity.

3. Other churches have five cupolas. The principal one which is large in the centre, represents our Lord; and the four small ones around it, represent the four Evangelists.

## **THE PILLARS**

The pillars in the Old Temple were given specific names (2 Chronicle 3:17), as they referred to the Disciples of Jesus Christ. Usually, there are twelve pillars in the Church of the New Testament.

St. Paul called the Disciples pillars (Gal. 2:9).

Our Lord promised us that: if we conquer He would make us pillars in the Eternal Temple of His Father, that we may remain there forever, and He will write on us His Father's Name and the Name of the City of His Father, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12).

In the ancient churches columns are decorated with various crowns. Rarely do you find two crowns alike, for this it symbolise to us those who will be crowned by the Lord, each receiving his own crown. It is only in the merits of Jesus' Blood that we are crowned.

## THE AMBON (ambwn)

The Greek word “awabaineig” means ‘to ascend’, for it is a high building which the bishop or priest stands on, when preaching to the people.

It usually rests on twelve columns, which symbolise the twelve Disciples; it is made of marble, stone or wood and is decorated with Icons of Saints.

In the Old Testament Solomon made an ambon for the Temple of God on the day of the consecration of the Temple, he stood upon it, and knelt on his knees in the presence of all the assembly and spread forth his hands towards heaven and praised God.

David also refers to it when he says, “Let them thank the Lord... Let them extol Him in the congregation of the people, and praise Him in the assembly (ambons) of the elders” (Ps. 107:31, 32).

In the fifth century BC, it is recorded that Ezra the scribe stood upon a wooden ambon, as he spoke to the people and blessed the Lord, read from the Holy Scriptures and explained its meanings.

We have already mentioned that St. Chrysostom preached from the ambon in order that the congregation might hear him with greater ease<sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Page 214, 219.

## **SYMBOLISM OF THE AMBON**

Ambon refers to the stone of the Lord's tomb on which the angels sat and preached to the women.

It also symbolises the mountain on which Moses received the Law. Also that on which Jesus spoke to the people, and that on which Christ 'the word of God', was transfigured in front of His Disciples.

## **THE MANDATUM TANK**

It is found in the western end of the nave. It is a shallow rectangular basin about sixty centimetres long and thirty centimetres wide and is laid in the floor, covered with boards.

This tank which is made of marble or stone, is used in the service of 'Blessing the water', on the feasts of the Apostles, the Epiphany and Maundy Thursday.

## **CHAPTER 14**

# **THE NARTEX AND THE BAPTISTERY**

## **CATECHUMEN AND REPENTANT**

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The “Narthex” is the western area near the entrance of the church, where the catechumen and repentant attend a special part of the liturgy called “Liturgy of Catechumen” or “Liturgy of word”.

Catechumen are those who are getting ready to be baptised, and the repentant are Christians who have committed certain sins and whose spiritual fathers forbid them to receive the Holy Communion for period.

### **THE CHURCH’S WOMB**

The baptistery and its font receive an excessive veneration from the Copts, as if they were the sacred Sanctuary and its Altar. This is apparent, for if the Altar is the Divine Throne around which believers gather with their heavenly Christ and His angels, the font is the gate that leads the believer to this throne: Thus, truly, the font is considered as the Church’s womb; through it, she brings forth sons of the heavenly God, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the merits of the Blood of the Son. These sons possess the right to enter into the mystery of the Divine Altar, receive communion and attain unity with the Heavenly One.

We can readily appreciate the significance of the baptistery if we, at first, perceive the relationship between the

Lord's baptism and His entire saving deed, and realise the correlation between baptism and the whole life of the church.

It was not by way of chance, that Christ commenced His public ministry with baptism, but instead, by careful planning. He wanted to establish a fundamental concept of faith, that is His ministry and His redeeming acts are based around one aim which is to bring the entire human race with Him into the Jordan to receive the 'new man', or the 'new creation' in Jesus Christ: In other words Christ in His baptism, has brought us mystically to His fellowship, so that heaven may be opened, the Holy Spirit may be descended upon us, and we hear our heavenly Father proclaiming: "This is my son, the beloved, my favour rests upon him". (Mt. 3:17).

The baptism of Christ has created for us a new dimension, in that it has enabled us to participate in the Lord's saving deeds, His crucifixion, burial and resurrection. For this reason Christ instructed His disciples, before His ascension, to baptise, saying "Go, therefore make disciples..., baptise them". (Mt. 28:19).

In response to the Lord's commandment, and from the beginning the church has called the entire world to be baptised in accordance with preaching about Christ and His salvation. Hence believers can exercise the crucified and risen life in Jesus Christ, and may receive the Spirit of the Messiah.

This theological concept of baptism has its own echo in setting the baptisteries, and influencing their site, shape, buildings, and their icons etc...

Perhaps a question could be raised here: Did the early Christians administer the baptism in the church buildings?

## **BAPTISM IN THE OPEN AIR**

Early, in the apostolic age, great numbers of Jews and Gentiles were embracing the Christian faith and were eager to examine the ‘new life in Him’. Obviously their baptism could not be achieved in baptisteries because of the large numbers of new Christians involved whose majority were adults, especially that churches were under persecution everywhere... The trend then was to baptise, in the Name of the Holy Trinity in an open environment, ie., in rivers<sup>(1)</sup>, seas<sup>(2)</sup>, springs etc... The Book of Acts refers to this type of open air baptism, for example when the chariot stopped and ‘Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch both went down into the water (river) and Philip baptised him’. (Acts 8:38).

Evidence of such open air baptism can be deduced from the writings of the first and second centuries. Tertullian for example related that St. Peter did baptise people in the Tiber. Moreover the “DIDACHE” says<sup>(3)</sup>.

“Baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running (living) water.

But if you have no living water, then baptise in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm.

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(1) Clementine Recognitios 6:15.

(2) Ibid 4:32; 7:38. Acts of Peter 5.

(3) Didache 7:1-3.

But if you have neither, then pour water on the head thrice, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.

This document “The DIDACHE, or the Lord’s instructions to the Gentiles through the twelve disciples”, which was produced during the years 100 to 150, and which offers us an excellent picture of the Christian life in the second century<sup>(1)</sup>, declares that baptism was performed in open-air by immersion, except when necessary, water was poured upon the head thrice.

The book of the ‘ODES OF SOLOMON’, illustrates the philosophy behind this baptismal rite of the early church. It contains a Lovely ode which correlates between open-air baptism and the Lord’s baptism in the Jordan, whereby the believer received the life-giving water through baptism. The ode says:<sup>(2)</sup>

“The water of the Logos approached my Lips,  
coming from the Liberal fountain of the Lord  
I have drunk and been intoxicated by the Living which  
does not die.  
My intoxication has not caused me to abandon my  
reason but merely to be quit of my vanity.  
It has transported me to paradise,  
where the richness and sweetness of the Lord resides”.

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(1) Fr. T.Y. Malaty: Christ in the Eucharist, 1973, p.56.- Quasten:  
Patrology, vol. 1, p. 30.

(2) Hamman: Baptism p. 12.

## BAPTISTERIES IN CLOSED ENVIRONMENT

In addition to the above-mentioned practice of open-air baptism, baptisteries were also in use from the early stages. They were either allotted a space within the church building or wherever believers were gathered for worship. Some baptisteries were discovered in the Catacombs of Rome, where worship was conducted under persecution.<sup>(1)</sup>

Thus, in brief, we can conclude that early Christians used to assign special rooms for baptisteries, and also when necessary special houses were used for worship.

The Church of Dura<sup>(2)</sup> in Syria is genuine example. Rekuart says in his book “The Church Burch Building”.<sup>(3)</sup>

“The Dura Church is an authentic example of a house church from the period of the persecutions... It is in fact, a normal Syrian courtyard house slightly adapted; the largest room has been made into a Eucharist chamber..., while at the entrance of the house a small room has been reserved for baptism.

This primitive baptistery already has a masonry baptismal font under a fairly elaborate canopy.

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(1) F. Bond: Fonts & Sonts covers, 1908, p.5.

Cabrol Dict. D’Archeologie Chret. et de Liturgie, 1907. Fasc 13:403.

(2) “DURA” was buried by the desert sand on Euphrats between Allepo and Bagdad

(3) p. 22

Even in this poor and provincial example it is clear that the Sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism are given separate chambers and that each is a public one.

## **BAPTISTERY SITE**

A considerable spiritual wisdom has gone into allocating the site of baptisteries: according to the 'DISCALIA'<sup>(1)</sup> the baptistery should be built at the north western side of the church, ie. at the left hand side of the entrance.

This signifies, by the Spirit, to those who enter the church that nobody can cross over to the chorus of the believers and receive the mystery of the Altar without entering the baptistery at first, in order to go through the spiritual birth that enables him to be united with the divine victim...

The soul that desires to attain the Holy of Holies and interact with the divine life in Jesus Christ must enter the Jordan with the Lord. These were the impressions of Hermas (from the second century) where he looked at the church as tower erected in the middle of the waters.<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus, while the altar is situated towards east the baptistery is built at the west so that it may act as a medium to transfer those who are in the west to the Lord, our true East. Bouyer says:<sup>(3)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> Chapter 35

<sup>(2)</sup> Hermas, The Shepherd.

<sup>(3)</sup> Bouyer

“Normally it the baptistery had two doors, or at least, two approaches to the font, one on the west, through which the neophyte came as he left the world of darkness, and one on the east through which he passed on to the luminous world of the church assembled for the Eucharist”.

He also says<sup>(1)</sup> , “Thus the polarisation of the church on the altar to the east was completed by a second polarisation of the baptistery in the west, where the passage from the world of darkness to the world of light was accomplished”.

This picture reminds us of Easter Eve of the early ages, when thousands of candidates entered the church at the western door of the baptistery (on the left side of the church), and then proceeded to the nave through the internal eastern door of the baptistery. They rose with Christ, bearing within them the Spirit of the Risen Lord, and were anointed with the ointment of Spirit. In their white garments they looked like a new creation, resembling the heavenly ones. Crowned by diadems to conquer the powers of the darkness they carried illuminating lanterns which expressed the state of their inner hearts.

Such a superb symphony was put together in every detail by our holy fathers when their hearts were moved by it.<sup>(2)</sup>

The “Odes of Solomon” contains a marvellous ode which is simply a brief description of what goes on in the mind

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(1) Ibid, p. 183.

(2) Rite Man, p. 184

and on the tongue of a newly-baptised person when entering the nave of the church. It says<sup>(1)</sup> :

Now we return to the site of the baptistery positioning of the baptistery as much will make it unavoidable to be seen by the believer entering the church. This in turn will remind him of where he was born, who his father and mother are. More precisely, the sight of the baptistery will light his heart with flames of love to his spiritual mother and heavenly Father... On this point Didymous the Blind says<sup>(2)</sup> :

*“The baptismal pool is the organ of the Trinity for the salvation of all men.*

*She becomes the mother of all by the Holy Spirit.*

*This is the meaning of the psalm ‘My father and my mother have abandoned me (Adam and Eve unable to remain immortal), but the Lord has taken me up’: He has given me the baptismal, pool as a mother and the Most High as a Father, and the Lord was Baptised for our sake as a Brother”.*

Perhaps, the baptistery site bears also some relation with the church’s theological concept of baptism as a “Baptismal vow”, in which the believer is committed to renounce (Apataxis) Satan and enter a covenant (Syntage) with Christ...

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<sup>(1)</sup> Odes of Solomon 11:9-10; 15:8; 21:2; 25:8; 1:1-2. Bernard, Odes of Solomon, p. 72, 78, 90, 167, 44. Danielou, Hist. of Early Christ. Doctrine, p. 326,7.

<sup>(2)</sup> PG.39:692B

When a Christian goes to the church everyday to participate in the Matins and Vesper services, he is reminded of his covenant, and takes upon himself to watch it. This concept appears strongly in the writings of the Alexandrian Fathers especially Origen. He believes that baptism in the beginning of the new life<sup>(1)</sup> and must be renewed daily<sup>(2)</sup>, that which he called ‘the preservation of the baptismal grace’<sup>(3)</sup>. He explained it by saying<sup>(4)</sup> that the Logos is capable of acting in the baptized soul as in a vine, until its fruit is ripe, and it reaches gradually the fullness of its sweetness.

## **BAPTISTERY ARCHITECTURE**

Early baptisteries, in general, were no more than a single room. Others, however, had a second room adjacent to it, where the neophytes received Chrism by the bishop, this was called Chrismarion. Not so often was there a third room to be used for clothing as was demonstrated at the Constantinian building in Jerusalem, which is a good example of the three-room baptisteries.

Some historian<sup>(5)</sup> believe that early baptisteries were concentrated around the cities of residence of the bishops,

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(1) In Gen. Hom. 13:4.

(2) In Rom Com. 5.

(3) In Jer. Hom. 2:3.

(4) In Cant. Com. 2.

(5) Davies J., *Early Christian Church*, 1965, p 203.

because of the close relationship between baptism and episcopal Chrism. They conclude this from the words of St. Gregory of Nazianus who revealed that many Christians often delayed their baptism due to the long distances they had to travel to the nearest font<sup>(1)</sup> .

Until the fourth century, the most commonly used shape of baptisteries was the ‘quadrilateral’, often with an apse at the end. By the beginning of the fifth century, other shapes began to appear, such as the hexagonal, the octagonal, the circular and the cruciform (the last was probably eastern, introduced in North Africa and then to Europe<sup>(2)</sup> ). In any case, these various types symbolise the theological concept of baptism and its effect in the life of the Church<sup>(3)</sup> .

## **1. THE QUADRILATERAL TYPE (four-sided design)**

This type resembles the shape of tomb and ‘martyrias’ of the early centuries. The philosophy behind it was that they looked at baptism as sharing death, burial and resurrection with Christ. This is evident from the words of St. Ambrose<sup>(4)</sup> font, whose appearance is somewhat like that of a tomb in shape.

He addresses the baptised saying<sup>(5)</sup> , “When you dip, you take on the likeness of death and burial; you receive the sacrament of the Cross”.

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(1) Adv. Prax. 3.

(2) Dict. of Liturgy & Worship. See Baptistry & Font

(3) S. Bedard, The symbolism of the Baptismal Font in Early Christian thought. J. G. Davies, The Architectural setting of Baptism. 1963.

(4) De Sacr. 3:1:1

(5) Ibid 2:7:23.

Typical examples of this type are the ones at Potiers from the fourth century and that of Nisibis, which was the work of the priest Akepsuma in the see of bishop Lolagesos in year 359. In simple form it consisted of a cube with an apse and a porch.

## **2. THE HEXAGONAL TYPE (six-sided design)**

This type refers to the sixth day of the week, i.e., Friday in which Christ was crucified and buried. Once again it stresses ideas of the Holy Fathers about baptism as much as a co-death and co-burial with Christ, as given in the words of the Apostle Paul:

*“Know you not, that so many of us we were baptised into Jesus Christ we were baptised into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” ( Rom. 6:4 ).*

*Buried with Him in Baptism, wherein also you are risen with Him. ( Col 2:12 ).*

Origen says<sup>(1)</sup> that the life-giving power of baptism has its source in Christ’s death upon the Cross, and that the life of baptismal grace is ultimately derived from and comes as a result of crucifixion.

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<sup>(1)</sup> In Gen. Hom. 13:4; In Exod. Hom. 11:2

### **3. THE OCTAGONAL TYPE**

This type symbolises the resurrection day of Christ, which is the eighth day of the week. The emphasis here is on the co-resurrection with Christ in baptism.

In view of this theological concept, the church went along to regard Easter Eve as a preferable time for baptising catechumens.

### **4. THE ROUND TYPE**

This type is meant to remind us of the baptismal grace, or in other words the re-birth ( Jn. 3:31). It also directs our minds to the concepts of the Church's womb, where all believers are born by the effect of the Holy Spirit. Along these lines, St. John Chrysostom says<sup>(1)</sup> :

*“What the womb is to the embryo, the water is the believer, for in the water he is fashioned and formed”.*

In addition, the round type of baptisteries signifies an interesting point, in that it simulates the circle of eternity. Inside it the baptised enjoys a life beyond all bounds... in a heavenly atmosphere.

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<sup>(1)</sup> In Joan Hom 26.

## 5. THE CRUCIFORM

This type is directly related to the manner of Christ's death, declaring the reality of baptism as a Cross. St. John Chrysostom says<sup>(1)</sup> :

*“Baptism is a Cross.  
What the Cross was to Christ and what His burial was,  
that baptism is to us”.*

## THE DOME

On ascending from the baptistery's water, the view of the dome above the baptised is meant to attract his thoughts to heaven. It expresses the Church beliefs that baptism is the beginning of a heavenly life, whereby the newly-baptised partakes of the Kingdom of God.

## THE STAIRS

In most of our ancient churches, like the one of St. Mena's in Marriot, there are two sets of stairs, one is at the east and the other is at the west. They form a part of the font building, which reveals to us some aspects of the baptismal rite. By one of the stairs, the candidate descends and dips into the water, while the celebrant of the mystery stands on the other stair. He puts his hand on the candidate's head and dips him thrice under the water.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Ep. Ad Rom. 10:4.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem explains this rite, saying:

*“You descended three times into the water, and ascended again, Here also is a hidden glance at the three days burial of Christ and His resurrection, Since the redeeming water offers you death and life simultaneously”.*

On the same point, St. Gregory of Nyssa also says:

*“ We bury ourselves in water and do so thrice”.*

St. John Chrysostom gives a splendid analysis of this rite by saying:<sup>(1)</sup>

*“ The immersion of the head in the water simulates the burial of our old man, and then the new man floats again.  
And as it is feasible for us to dip then float, it is equally feasible for God to bury the old man and put on us the new man”.*

Hermas sees that immersion is a type of descent into the Hades, which gives an indication to the water of death.<sup>(2)</sup>

In brief, we can conclude from the writings of the fathers that the proper canonical rite for baptism which was

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<sup>(1)</sup> Fr T Y Malaty: Divine Love P853

<sup>(2)</sup> See P. Lundberg La Cypologie baptismale dans l'ancienne Eglise, lund, 1942.

conducted by the Early Church was by dipping the candidate's head thrice into the water while he is standing in the water.<sup>(1)</sup>

## **BAPTISTERY ICON**

In the majority of Coptic churches the baptistery icon is fitted upon the apse of the baptistery. The icon shows the baptism of Christ in the Jordan by St. John the Baptist, which signifies an essential theological fact that was declared by the school of Alexandria. It assures that our baptism is directly derived from and is an extant of Christ's baptism, the former extracts its efficiency from the latter. St. Clement of Alexandria says that the believer is bound indissoluble with Christ in baptism.<sup>(2)</sup>

The early church has given special interest to baptistery icons, since they reflect the atmosphere of the place and the nature of the new life to the neophytes... it is the first sight their eyes fall on, after their new birth.

It was found that baptisteries of the catacombs of Rome are decorated with a number of symbolic paintings such as a lamb, fish etc... . The Lamb refers to Christ, the Lamb of God bears the sins of the world. He descended to the Jordan among all sinners to sanctify them. As for the fish, Tertullian says in his treatise 'On Baptism':<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) Wall Porches & Fonts, p. 196-7.

(2) Paed 1:25:3, Strom 7:14:1

(3) De Bapismo 1.

*“ We small fish, after the example of our fish ( Christ ), are born in the water and it is only by continuing in the water that we are safe ”.*

Other example of baptisteries is that of the church of Dura which is designed with various icons, we mention some of them here. Over the font there is a fairly elaborate canopy, painted on the inside with a number of stars. They may well represent the crowned believers at the kingdom of God, glittering like the stars. On the back wall, another painting of the good shepherd standing by His flock, is displayed, and the tower portion of it shows Adam, Eve, the tree, and the Serpent. This icon expresses the idea of sin and redemption which is achieved in baptism, by the good Shepherd who takes care of His church. A third painting represents the healing of the paralytic. On the top half, it shows Christ speaking with verses from Mark 2:10-11, and on the rest of it the paralytic carrying his bed. This icon brings forward the concept of baptism as a remission of sins, and a healing of all spiritual deficiencies.

Lastly we wish to add that Western churches have taken a special interest in decorating their baptisteries and font with crosses and icons, representing events from the Old Testament, which prefigure baptism, and also from the New Testament, relative to Christ's life. Some other churches use paintings of devils as a sign of the renunciation of Satan. They even go to the extent of calling the northern door of the baptistery “Door of Devil” and it is left open during baptism so that the renounced devil might be cast away through it.

# **CHAPTER 15**

## **THE CHURCH - TOWER**

### **(BELFRY)**

The church represents the Lord's ship voyaging towards heaven, similar to the ship's guard-tower, the church has a belfry, where bells are normally hung.

Within this thought Hermas saw the Church as a tower built upon water, in his book "The Shepherd"<sup>(1)</sup> .

## **HISTORY OF THE BELLS' USE:**

The custom of using bells in the Divine Service goes back as early as the Old Testament Bells were enumerated among the ornaments of the high-priest's ephod, so they were heard at the high-priest entrance and departure from the Sanctuary.

Larger bells were also used, namely the "Megeruphita"<sup>(2)</sup>. The Mishana<sup>(3)</sup> states that the sound of the Megeruphita were loud to such an extent that one could not hear a person speaking in all of Jerusalem. These "Megeruphita" were principally sounded for three purposes:

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(1) Hermas, The Shepherd vision 3.

(2) O'Brien, a History of the Mass & its ceremonies

(3) Mishana is the oral law of the Hebrew, consists of various traditions respecting the Law of Moses. The Mishana and Gemara (or a Commentary on Mishana) form the Talmud, of which there are two parts, i.e., that of Jerusalem and that of Babylon.

1. To summon the priests to service.
2. To summon the Levites to sing.
3. To invite the stationary-men to bring the uncleaned ones to the gate called “Nicanor”<sup>(1)</sup> .

In the early church of the New Testament, namely in the first three centuries. The use of bells to summon the believers for worshipping was impossible, because of the certainty of persecution. The introduction of large bells to the church is attributed to St. Paulinus. Bishop of Nola, about 400 AD, but as he omits any reference to bells in his letter giving a detailed description of his church, the claim made for him seems to be doubtful. However by the sixth century, bells were used in the Western Church.

It is worth noting that the West bells were originally thought of as heathen, and were baptised in a special ceremony to renovate them. However, later the object was clearly that God might use the sounds of bells to summon the hearts of the people to worship Him.

## **HAND-BELLS**

In the records of the Early British and Irish churches hand- bells were mentioned as early as the sixth century.

Renaudot relates that the bishops of Egypt who accompanied George, the Son of Nubia’s King, on his mission to Egypt, about 850 AD used to ring bells at the elevation of

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<sup>(1)</sup> O’Brien, a History of the Mass.

the hosts. But this custom has no trace in our ceremony, there is no hand bell belonging to the altar<sup>(2)</sup> .

## **THE BELL & THE TRUMPET**

In the Church, the bells replaced the trumpets of the Old Testament, which were used for the following purposes:

1. On receiving the Divine Law (Exod.3:27). The Scripture states, as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder Moses spoke, and God answered him in the thunder. “Now bells are rung in the church, as being the new Sinai Mount, where the Lord meets His people and speaks to them”.
2. In wars (Judges 3:27). The church is the place of the spiritual battle, where the children of God struggle against sin with the weapon of the Holy Spirit.
3. On celebrating feasts, and we do not cease ringing bells at every service until the last-advent of Christ, i.e., celebrating the eternal feast, whence the sound of God’s trumpet will be heard. (Thes. 4:16).
4. On ordaining the kings. (2 Kings 9:13).

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<sup>(2)</sup> Butler, Ancient Churches of Egypt, vol. 2, p. 81

## THE ORDER OF RINGING THE CHURCH-BELLS

1. Church-bells are rung during the “offertory”, announcing that Christ the King reigns in our souls, through His Sacrifice. They are also rung during the communion, declaring the joy of the church with this Heavenly Feast.
2. Special rhythm is tolled on feasts.
3. On the death of a member of the parish, a special mourning rhythm is tolled as a participation of the whole church in one’s mourning.

The mourning rhythm is tolled at the beginning of every hour on Good-Friday Service.

4. On the high feast, Sunday and during the 50 days from Eastern to Pentecost, no mourning rhythm is tolled, since the church is rejoicing and celebrating the events of these days.

