The Coptic Church was established in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by St. Mark the Evangelist in the city of Alexandria around 43 A.D. The church adheres to the Nicene Creed. St. Athanasius (296-373 A.D.), the twentieth Pope of the Coptic Church effectively defended the Doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ's Divinity at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. His affirmation of the doctrine earned him the title; "Father of Orthodoxy" and St. Athanasius "the Apostolic".

The term "Coptic" is derived from the Greek "Aigyptos" meaning "Egyptian". When the Arabs arrived in Egypt in the seventh century, they called the Egyptians "qibt". Thus the Arabic word "qibt" came to mean both "Egyptians" and "Christians".

The term "Orthodoxy" here refers to the preservation of the "Original Faith" by the Copts who, throughout the ages, defended the Old Creed against the numerous attacks aimed at it.

The Coptic Orthodox Church believes that

the Holy Trinity: God The Father, God The Son, and God The Holy Spirit, are equal to each other in one unity; and that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world. Less changes have taken place in the Coptic Church than in any other church whether in the ritual or doctrine aspects and that the succession of the Coptic Patriarchs, Bishops, priests and Deacons has been continuous.

"Blessed is Egypt my people" (Isa 19:25)

God's promise to His people is always fulfilled; He foretold that He would ride on a light and upon a swift cloud and come to Egypt (Isa 19:1); and in that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border (Isa 19:19). This promise was fulfilled by the flight of the Holy Family from the face of the tyrant Herod to find refuge among the Gentiles. Thus our Lord Jesus Christ came during His childhood to Egypt to lay by Himself the foundation stone of His Church in Egypt which has become one of the four primary "Sees" in the world, among the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome, and joined later by the "See" of Constantinople.

The star of the Egyptian Church shone through the School of Alexandria which taught Christendom the allegoric and spiritual methods in interpreting the Holy Scripture and was the leader in defending the Orthodox faith on an ecumenical level.

The Christian monastic movement in all its forms started in Egypt, attracting the heart of the Church towards the desert, to practice the angelic inner life. This happened at the time when the doors of the royal court had been opened to the clergy, and this consequently endangered the church, as the quiet and spiritual church work was mixed with the temporal authority and politics of the royal court.

The Egyptian Church carried our Lord Jesus Christ's cross throughout generations, bearing sufferings even from the side of Christians themselves. She continued to offer a countless number of martyrs and confessors throughout ages. Sometimes the people of towns were martyred and many struggled to win the crowns of martyrdom happily and with a heart full of joy.

Our Church is ancient and new at the same time: ancient in being apostolic, founded by St. Mark the Evangelist and traditional in holding fast to the original apostolic faith without deviation. She is also new through her Living Messiah who never becomes old and through the Spirit of God who renews her youth (Ps. 103:5).

The Coptic Church is rich with her evangelistic and ascetic life, her genuine patriotic inheritance, her heavenly worship, her spiritual rituals, her effective and living hymns, her beautiful icons, etc. She attracts the heart towards heaven without ignoring actual daily life. We can say that she is an apostolic, contemporary church that carries life and thought to the contemporary man without deviation. One finds in her life, sweetness and power of Spirit, with appreciation to and sanctification of arts, literature and human culture.

The Church is well known for her numerous saints: ascetics, clergymen and laymen. She offered many saints throughout ages and is still offering the same today. For she believes that practicing the sanctified life and communion with God, the Holy One, is prior to satisfying minds with solid mental studies.

1. Definition of Apostolic Age:

The Apostolic Age is the time in which the Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ lived and preached the Christian faith. It accounts for approximately 70 years and extended from the foundation of the Church on the day of Pentecost on 30 AD to the departure of St. John the Apostle, 100 AD.

2. Importance of Study of the Apostolic Age:

1. It is the origin of the Christian Church delineating its separatism from Judaism. It is the Age of the Holy Spirit, inspiration and constitution.

2. It is astounding evidence of the power of Christianity where its preaching and teaching reached almost every part of the world in a very short period of time as a result of the Mysterious Handiwork of God.

3. It reflects purity, effectiveness and the Divine power of Christianity and how by a Mysterious Godly Work could renew the creation of every nation, Jewish, Roman, Greek ….etc

4. It is well known that the Lord Jesus Christ taught his holy disciples many teachings and performed many miracles not recorded in the Holy Gospels (John 20:30). Also, the Lord spent 40 days after His Glorious Resurrection appearing to His disciples teaching them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) and this also was not recorded in the Holy Gospels. Therefore, the Christian teaching in the Apostolic Age which is known as "Tradition" is the reflection of such teachings and arrangements that were given to the disciples by our Lord.

5. The Apostolic Age represents role models of great persons in preaching, teaching and service who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and supported by the power of the New Creation in baptism. Definitely this was an incentive for good deeds.

3. Historical Sources of the Apostolic Age:

1. All the Holy Books of the New Testament in particular the Holy Book of Acts.

2. Teachings and laws that belong to the Apostles such as the Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) and Didascalia.

3. Writings of the Apostolic Fathers who are the disciples of the Apostles such as St. Clement the Roman, St. Polycarp, St. Ignatius, St. Hermas and St. Papias.

4. Pseudo-Canonical Books (Apocrypha) which can be used as historical sources of the Apostolic Age although the Church refused them as inspired books.

5. Jewish sources such as writings by Philo of Alexandria, Josephus the famous Jewish Historian who was contemporary of Jerusalem destruction and wrote "Influences of Jews" and "Wars of Jews", and Mishna which is the teachings of Rabbis in the First Century and provides good information about the Apostles, their teachings, the rituals and worship in the early Church as a excommunicated group out of the Synagogue.

6. Latin writers and historians such as Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny.

7. Writers of the Second Century who are the second successors of the Apostles such as Justin the Martyr, St. Irenaeus, and Hegesippus.

8. Christian Historians such as Eusebious, an early Christian writer, who wrote the church history since the Incarnation to 324 AD and was called the Father of Church history.

9. Ancient monuments such as scrolls of the Dead Sea.

The Coptic Church or the Church of Alexandria is called "Sees of St. Mark"; one of the earliest four sees: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome.

St. Mark, The Founder

The Copts are proud of the apostolicity of their Church, whose founder is St. Mark; one of the seventy Apostles (Mk 10:10), and one of the four Evangelists. He is regarded by the Coptic hierarchy as the first of their unbroken 117 patriarchs, and also the first of a stream of Egyptian martyrs.

This apostolicity was not only furnished on grounds of its foundation but rather by the persistence of the Church in observing the same faith received by the Apostle and his successors, the Holy Fathers.

St. Mark's Bibliography

St. Mark was an African native of Jewish parents who belonged to the Levites' tribe. His family lived in Cyrenaica until they were attacked by some barbarians, and lost their property. Consequently, they moved to Jerusalem with their child John Mark (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37). Apparently, he was given a good education and became conversant in both Greek and Latin in addition to Hebrew. His family was highly religious and in close relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. His cousin was St. Barnabas and his father's cousin was St. Peter. His mother, Mary, played an important part in the early days of the Church in Jerusalem. Her upper room became the first Christian church in the world where the Lord Jesus Christ Himself instituted the Holy Eucharist (Mk 14:12-26). Also, this is the same place where the Lord appeared to the disciples after His resurrection and His Holy Spirit came upon them.

Young Mark was always associated with the Lord, who choose him as one of the seventy. He is mentioned in the Holy Scriptures in a number of events related with the Lord. For example, he was present at the wedding of Cana of Galilee, and was the man who had been carrying the jar when the two disciples went to prepare a place for the celebration of the Passover (Mk 14:13-14; Lk 22:11).

St. Mark and The Lion

The vioce of the lion is the symbol of St. Mark for two reasons:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | He begins his Holy Gospel by describing John the Baptist as a lion roaring in the desert (Mk 1:3). |
| 2. | His famous story with lion, as related to us by Severus Ebn-El-Mokafa:Once a lion and lioness appeared to John Mark and his father Arostalis while they were traveling in Jordan. The father was very scared and begged his son to escape, while he awaited his fate. John Mark assured his father that Jesus Christ would save them and began to pray. The two beasts fell dead and as a result of this miracle, the father believed in Christ. |

Preaching with the Apostles

At first, St. Mark accompanied St. Peter on his missionary journeys inside Jerusalem and Judea. Then he accompanied St. Paul and St. Barnabas on their first missionary journey to Antioch, Cyprus and Asia Minor, but for some reason or another he left them and returned home (Acts 13:13). On their second trip, St. Paul refused to take him along because he left them on the previous mission; for this reason St. Barnabas was separated from St. Paul and went to Cyprus with his cousin St. Mark (Acts 15:36-41). There, he departed in the Lord and St. Mark buried him. Afterwards, St. Paul needed St. Mark with him and they both preached in Colosse (Col 4:10), Rome (Phil 24; 2 Tim 4:11) and perhaps in Venice.

In Africa

St. Mark's real labor lays in Africa. He left Rome to Pentapolis, where he was born. After planting the seeds of faith and performing many miracles he traveled to Egypt, through the Oasis, the desert of Libya, Upper Egypt and then entered Alexandria from its eastern gate in 61 A.D.

On his arrival, the strap of his sandal was loose. He went to a cobbler to mend it. When the cobbler - Anianos - took an awl to work on it, he accidentally pierced his hand and cried aloud "O One God". At this utterance, St. Mark rejoiced and after miraculously healing the man's wound, took courage and began to preach to the hungry ears of his convert. The spark was ignited and Anianos took the Apostle home with him. He and his family were baptized, and many others followed.

The spread of Christianity must have been quite remarkable because pagans were furious and ought St. Mark everywhere. Smelling the danger, the Apostle ordained a bishop (Anianos), three priests and seven deacons to look after the congregation if anything befell him. He left Alexandria to Berce, then to Rome, where he met St. Peter and St. Paul and remained there until their martyrdom in 64 A.D.

Upon returning to Alexandria in 65 AD, St. Mark found his people firm in faith and thus decided to visit Pentapolis. There, he spent two years preaching and performing miracles, ordaining bishops and priests, and winning more converts.

Finally he returned to Alexandria and was overjoyed to find that Christians had multiplied so much that they were able to build a considerable church in the suburban district of Baucalis.

His Martyrdom

In the year 68 AD, Easter fell on the same day as the Serapis feast. The furious heathen mob had gathered in the Serapis temple at Alexandria and then descended on the Christians who were celebrating the Glorous Resurrection at Baucalis. St. Mark was seized, dragged with a rope through the main streets of the city. Crowds were shouting "The ox must be led to Baucalis," a precipitous place full of rock where they fed the oxen that were used in the sacrifice to idols. At nightfall the saint was thrown into prison, where he was cheered by the vision of an angel, strengthening him saying, "Now your hour has come O Mark, the good minister, to receive your recompense. Be encouraged, for your name has been written in the book of life." When the angel disappeared, St. Mark thanked God for sending His angel to him. Suddenly, the Savior Himself appeared and said to him, "Peace be to you Mark, my disciple and evangelist!" St. Mark started to shout, "O My Lord Jesus" but the vision disappeared.

On the following morning probably during the triumphal procession of Serapis he was again dragged around the city till death. His bloody flesh was torn, and it was their intention to cremate his remains, but the wind blew and the rain fell in torrents and the populaces disperse. Christians stole his body and secretly buried him in a grave that they had engraved on a rock under the altar of the church.

His Apostolic Acts

St. Mark was a broad-minded Apostle. His ministry was quite productive and covered large field of activities. These include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| • | Preaching in Egypt, Pentapolis, Judea, Asia Minor, and Italy during which time he ordained bishops, priests, and deacons. |
| • | Establishing the "School of Alexandria" which defended Christianity against philosophical school of Alexandria and conceived a large number of great Fathers. |
| • | Writing the Divine Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist which was modified later by St. Cyril to the Divine Liturgy known today as the Divine Liturgy of St. Cyril.  |

Dogmas, to the Coptic Orthodox Church, are not merely theological concepts concerning God, man, church, eternal life, heavenly creatures, demon etc…, to be discussed among clergymen, scholars and laymen, but are, in essence, daily experiences each member of the church has to live. In other words, dogmas representing our faith in God through various aspects have one message, i.e. our communion with God the Father in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, by His Holy Spirit. Thus we conceive of our redemption, and our membership of the church, a deep understanding of the Holy Bible, an acceptance of the Kingdom of God within our souls, a communion with the heavenly creatures and the experience of eternal life.

The Church is not merely a school involved in researches and teaching dogmas, but an institution that worships God and serves mankind. It works for the transformation and the renewal of this world, and hopefully awaits the world to come. Truly, the Church would not be the church, as we know it without Christian dogmas. Dogmas interpret our whole philosophy of the Church through repeated practice of our faith through the holy tradition (the Holy Scriptures, worship, behavior and preaching). All these elements represent different aspects of the one inseparable church life.

Dogmas in fact are mirrors of the Holy Scriptures. They explain the Holy Scriptures and attract men to enjoy its spirit.

Dogmas correlate to our ascetic attitude. The early Alexandrian theologians and clergymen were true ascetics and as a result asceticism still strongly affects our theology. This is not by denying the needs of our bodies, as some scholars charge, but by insisting on the solitariological aspect: The early Coptic ascetics were involved in enjoying the redeeming deeds of the Holy Trinity, i.e. in enjoying the sanctification of the soul, mind, body, gifts etc...through communion with the Father in His Son through the Holy Spirit.

Dogmas are what is believed, taught, confessed and practiced.

Dogmas are the interpretation of our experience of God, in the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus Christ. This experience throughout the ages does not alter, for our Lord Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:18). The disciples and apostles (and bishops afterwards) did not sit around a table and agree to teach new dogmas, but rather they preached their Christian experience. As St. John says, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you" (1 Jn 1:3). Thus all Christian dogmas resulted from Church's experience of the Crucified and Risen Christ, "Truth" and "Love" at the same time. We receive these dogmas as the unchangeable truth that we must holdfast with love.

The Alexandrian Popes (bishops), as theologians and pastors, looked to dogmas as an expression of evangelic truth integrated with love. They were very zealous in defending the Orthodox faith and dogmas against any heresy, not only in Egypt but also in all Christendom, offering their lives as sacrifices on behalf of the Church. They were very firm and strict concerning the faith they had once received (2 Tim 12:14).

The Coptic Orthodox Church is well known as a conservative Church, especially in dogmas and doctrines. At the same time, it progresses not by embracing new doctrines or new "articles of faith" but by explaining the same faith "once given to the saints" in a contemporary language.

The Coptic Orthodox Church is an Apostolic Church, not only because her founder is St. Mark the Apostle who ministered in Egypt, ordained a bishop, priests, and deacons to aid him in his ministry and was martyred in Alexandria, and not only because her first Patriarch is St. Mark's successor through an unbroken chain of popes since the apostolic age, but also because she preserves the apostolic thought in her life, spirituality, liturgies and dogmas. She is actually a living extension of the apostolic church without deviation.

The Coptic Church is sometimes accused of exaggerated conservatism and refusal of concessions. As a matter of fact she is not stagnant or stolid but faithful and conservative, preserving the apostolic life, and desiring to offer the gift of faith in all its aspects throughout the ages.

A CHURCH OF ASCETICISM

God, who created all the trees in the Garden of Eden for the sake of man, His beloved; ordered him not to eat from just one specific tree. This was not to deprive man, or to impose His authority, but rather to make man worthy of His love through fasting and obeying His commandment; "man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord..." Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4.

The Lord, Himself, the Word Incarnate, fasted before undergoing trial and undertaking His ministry on our behalf We therefore fast with Him to attain victory and blessings at work, and to be able to proceed in the spirit and not according to the flesh (Rom. 8: 1). The Lord fasted for forty days (Matt. 4:2) to transfigurate in the midst of Moses and Elijah who also fasted for forty days (Exod. 40:28; 1 Kings 19:8). In this way He declared that fasting is not deprivation, neither is it a restraint upon the body; but it is rather a sublimation with our Lord on Mount Tabor which enables us to enjoy His Glory made manifest in us.

The Coptic Church (as well as the Ethiopian Church) is an ascetic church that believes in the power of fasting in the life of the believers. Fasting is not considered a physical exercise, but rather it is an offering of inward love offered by the heart as well as the body. Consequently, the Church requests believers to fast for over six months a year. Strangely enough, the Coptic Church desires - of its own free will to spend its whole life fasting, while most churches in the world increasingly tend to reduce the fasting periods from one generation to the next. In fact, during confession many of the Coptic youth request to increase the days of fasting... very few indeed complain of the many fasting periods.

THE CONCEPT OF FASTING

1. The church requires us to fast and abstain from food for a period of time to experience hunger. The Lord Himself experienced hunger (Matt. 4:2) though He is the source of all satisfaction, physical and spiritual. The apostles experienced hunger as they fasted (Acts 10:1; 2 Cor. 11:27). Moreover, we should not indulge in delicacies after abstention, but rather we should observe eating certain non-fat foods:

"I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth" Dan. 10:3.

" Take you also unto your wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentils, and millet, and spell" Ez. 4:9.

"MY knees are weak through fasting, and my flesh fails of fatness" Ps. 109:24.

In spite of that, fasting is not merely abstention from food, drink, or delicacies. It is essentially an expression of our love to God who has given His Only-Begotten Son to die for us. If the Lord Jesus delivered Himself for my sake (Ephes. 3:20), then in turn I wish to die all day for His sake (Rom. 8:38). Thus fasting and abstention from food is closely connected with abstention from all that is evil or has a semblance of evil. It is moreover connected with continuous spiritual growth, thereby achieving an offering of fasting that is holy in the eyes of God.

That is what Pope Athanasius elaborated powerfully in his first letter: [When we fast, we should hallow the fast (Joel 2:15)... It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but also with the soul. Now the soul is humbled when it doesn't follow wicked thoughts... And as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, being the heavenly Bread, is the food of the saints... so is the devil the food of the impure, and of those who do nothing which is of the light, but work the deeds of darkness... For not only does such a fast obtain pardon for souls, but being holy, it prepares the saints, and raises them above the earth].

2. God created our "good" bodies and souls to function together under His guidance and to carry out his will. Now if our souls succumb to the wicked desires of the flesh in disobedience, we become carnal (Rom. 7:14), Through fasting we beseech God to subjugate our bodies by the Holy Spirit so that we might live in the spirit and not according to the flesh (Rom. 8:12). It is true that St. Paul preached the Gospel to many, but he warned against the flesh, which he mastered by fasting as he feared to be a castaway. (I Cor. 9:27).

3. While fasting, we pray to be liberated from our "ego." Thus we fast and abstain from "selfishness" as much as we abstain from food. We practice loving God through loving our brothers and all humanity by His grace. Hence St. Paul says "Though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it forfeit me nothing" I Cor. 13:3. Therefore fasting should be associated with the witness to God's love through giving alms and striving for the salvation of souls. In the early church, many catechumens were baptized on Easter eve or the Christian Passover as a result of the great activity of church preaching during Lent besides the rest of the year doing so in a state of continuous prayer, fasting and practical testimony. Particularly that people were more prepared, while fasting, to receive the word of God and become members in the body of our Lord Jesus.

Until today, Lent is considered one of the richest periods of wholehearted devotion demonstrated by practical offerings to the poor and the needy. Believers undertake this in obedience to the Scripture: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? Is it not to deal by bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? " Is. 5 8:3 -7.

In the first centuries of Christianity, praying and fasting (the direct love of God) were integrated with alms giving (our love to God interpreted by our love to our neighbors). This is explained in the book "The Shepherd" of Hermes, urging believers to offer their savings resulting from fasting to widows and orphans, Origen blesses those who fast and feed the poor, and St. Augustine has written a whole book on fasting, as he feels that a person, who fasts without offering his savings to the poor, has in fact practiced "greed" rather than fasting.

4. The days of fasting are days of repentance and contrition. At the same time, they are periods of joy and cheer as believers experience victory and power in their innermost self. Fasting does not imply fatigue, restraint, or irritation, but rather it inspires joy and inward gladness with the Lord reigning within the heart... This is the experience of the Coptic Church particularly during the Holy Week. At that time believers practice asceticism more than at any other time of fasting. The signs of real spiritual joy and consolation filling the heart are so clearly evident then.

Pope Athanasius of Alexandria has recorded this experience. He says: [Let us not fulfill these days like those that mourn, but by enjoying spiritual food, let us try to silence our fleshly lusts. For by these means we shall have strength to overcome our adversaries, like blessed Judith (13:8), when having first exercised herself in fasting and prayers, she overcame the enemies, and killed Olophernes

Fasting is not a situation which may be used as a pretext for anger. It is rather an opportunity to demonstrate a loving heart and power over the spirit of anger, selfishness, and all egocentricity.

FASTING AND CHURCH ORDER

While many Copts (as well as Ethiopians) spend most of their

days fasting of their own free will, and while they do so by the

Motherly help and love of the Church (through the Church Order),

Many westerners avoid the cross of fasting and put forward the

Following excuses:

1. Fasting is an individual worship to be practiced privately (in secret) (Matt. 6:17,18). The answer to this is that the same commandment applies to prayer and giving alms (Matt. 6:3,6). Besides, prayer and alms giving are practiced in all the churches of the world on a communal basis. In the Old Testament people observed communal worship in the form of prayer, hymns and Bible readings as well as fasting (Zech. 8:19; Est. 4:3. 16; Ezra. 8:21; 2 Chorn. 203; Joel 3:5). In the New Testament the apostles fasted together (Act 13:2,3). Hence why should believers avoid communal fasting under the pretext of private observance? The secret of the Early Church being strong was its unified faith as well as communal participation even in fasting. History itself is a witness that ever since the apostolic age, both Eastern and Western churches fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays besides the Great Lent. To answer to the concept of fasting privately in order to avoid boastfulness, we find the apostle revealing that he fasted. He announces "with fasting," and he practiced it with those who were on the boat (Acts 27:21).

2. Why are the days set for fasting specifically designated? If they are not indicated or organized by the Church, believers may be deprived of fasting all their lives. This is just what has happened in most Western Churches. In the Old Testament there were designated fasting days (Zech. 8:9) side by side with communal fasting or personal ones practiced in periods of hardship.

3. Some object to fasting designated by the Church by quoting the words: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink..." Col 2:16, and "What God has cleansed, that call you common" Act 10: 11- 15, and also the words: some shall depart from the faith. Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats which God has created to be received with thanksgiving..." I Tim. 4:1-3. This can be explained as follows:

a. The Apostle didn't say, "Let no man therefore judge you in fasting" but he said… "In meat or in drink." Thus what is intended here is the abstention from certain forbidden food designated by the Law of Moses. As when St. Peter saw a great sheet cover with all kinds of food and abstained at first (Acts 10: 11 - 15). Therefore the Apostle meant here to fight the idea of reverting to Judaism.

b. Concerning those who forbid specific food such as the Manichaeans and the Donatists, who also have forbidden marriage as unclean and eating meat as defiling ... those were excommunicated. During fasting we do not forbid certain food (as unclean) but we voluntarily subjugate and control the body (I Cor. 9:27).

It is noteworthy to underline that the first man was vegetarian (Gen. 1:29), and man continued to avoid eating meat until the period of Noah's ark (Gen. 9:3). At that time his spiritual standard dropped. This explains why believers eat vegetarian food when they wish to create a suitable atmosphere for spiritual development. The same behavior was observed by Daniel and the three young men at the palace, and also by Ezekiel.

c. "Church Order" is essential to communal life, as it is indicated in 2 John. Besides, the church is known for its flexibility; believers can be allowed to increase, decrease or even stop fasting by their spiritual fathers, during confession, and according to their spiritual, physical, or health condition.

PERIODS OF FASTING IN THE COPTIC CHURCH

First: The Weekly fast: Just as the church practices worship weekly, it also practices general fasting weekly. This has its origin in the Jewish Church. Jews were accustomed to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, as on these two days Moses went up to receive the commandments and descended the mountain carrying the two stone tablets. That is why when Christ spoke about the Pharisee, He said he boasted about fasting every week (Luke 18:12). Since the apostolic age, the Church has been aware of the value of fasting and designated Wednesdays and Fridays as days for fasting. This is done in memory of Christ's betrayal and crucifixion.

Second: The Great Lent or "Tessaracoste (forty days fasting)." This is set to achieve a dual purpose: first, to be prepared to experience the joyful resurrection of the crucified Lord. Secondly, to prepare catechumens through teachingand guidance to practice worship together with practical repentance, so that they might receive the sacrament of baptism on Easter eve.

It is necessary to stop and reflect upon these two objectives. Although we celebrate the resurrection weekly on every Sunday, and practice the "resurrected life" every day through continuous renewal and unceasing repentance, yet we are in need of the fasting period of forty days (Great Lent) besides the Holy Week in order to become ready for the joy of the resurrection and the power it gives. Within this period we practice "mortification" in the Lord, that His resurrection may be transfigured in us, and to be able to say with the Apostle Paul: "If so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together" Rom. 8:17.

With regards to the preparation of the catechumens within this period, fasting is necessary for the performance of this task, and gives an increasingly deep significance. It implies an open loving heart towards human race. The whole church fasts, so that God may attract new children to Him, and prepare them for the blessings of His Fatherhood... Thus fasting is a sign of our faith in God's power manifested in our ministry and preaching. On the other hand, fasting particularly the Great Lent should have the aim of witnessing to Jesus Christ and of unceasing prayer for the sanctification of mankind.

At every Lent, a believer used to remember how the Church fasted on his behalf and strived to gain him as a holy vessel and as an altar to the Lord. Similarly, it is his turn now to repay this love by working for the salvation of others.

Actually the observance of "Great Lent" dates back to the age of the apostles:

a. In the writings of St. Irenaeus in the second century - mention is made of believers who fasted for a day, besides others who fasted for two days before Easter, as well as others who fasted for longer periods. There is reference to some who counted forty hours in a day. This does not mean that St. Irenaeus negates fasting during Lent or the Holy Week, but he indicates the complete abstention from food which precedes the Easter Liturgy of Eucharist. For while some are satisfied to fast on Holy Saturday (and that is the only time when the Coptic Church fasts on a Saturday in the form of completeabstention), others abstain for two successive days: Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Concerning the calculation of forty hours in a day, this probably refers to a custom practiced in the second century, and which some Copts follow, wherein fasting starts on Good Friday and continues until sunrise on Easter Sunday i.e., until the celebration of the Easter Liturgy. This is equivalent to forty hours.

b. In the middle of the third century, there is strong evidence that fasting extended for six days (from Holy Monday to Holy Sunday). Some scholars comment on this as a clear indication of the distinction made between fasting during the six paschal (Holy) days as a whole and fasting on Good Friday and Holy Saturday which has specific significance 10. Actually, what occurred in the third century may be considered as complementary to what is mentioned by St. Irenaeus. This saint mentions complete long abstention preceding the Easter Liturgy, whereas what is mentioned regarding the middle of the third century refers to fasting during the Holy Week as a whole and which also has specific significance, especially that it is still observed by our Church with greater asceticism than the rest of Lent period.

c. In AD 325, the Council of Nicene mentioned Lent as a settled matter recognized by the Universal Church, and not as aninnovation in the church or in some churches.

d. In the middle of the fourth century, St. Athanasius was greatly concerned with writing the "Paschal Letters," even in his exile. The Popes of Alexandria have followed this custom at least ever since Pope Dionysius of Alexandria. These were written on the occasion of the Epiphany, not only to designate Easter time but also to designate the beginning of Lent immediately followed by the Holy Week and by Easter day.

It is noteworthy that in the letters that have come down to us, St. Athanasius integrated Lent with the Holy Week, although he stressed the clear distinction between them.

The Coptic Church fasts for fifty five days (forty day [Lent]; eight days [Holy Week] and seven days instead of the seven Saturdays which are not observed with complete abstention.

Third: Other Periods of Fasting: Besides the weekly fasting and Lent followed by the Holy Week, Copts observe the following periods of fasting:

I- Fasting before Christmas: Its win is spiritual preparation to receive the birth of Christ. It lasts for forty days plus three days in memory of the general fast observed in the reign of Al Moiz when EI-Muqattarn Mountain was moved.

2- The Fast of the Apostles: This begins on the day following Pentecost and continues until the feast of the martyrs, SS. Peter and Paul, on Abib the fifth (twelfth of July). The aim of this fasting period is to fill the soul with fervor and zeal to preach the Word with an apostolic thought.

3- The Fast of Nineveh: This lasts for three days. It starts on the Monday preceding the one before Lent. It probably refers to Jonah's fast, while he was inside the whale's belly.

4- The Fast of the Holy Virgin: This takes place fifteen days before the celebration of the Holy Virgin Mary feast. (It lasts from the seventh to the twenty second of August (16th of Misra)).

5- Fasting on the eve (Paramoun) of Christmas and on the eve of the Epiphany... this fast is observed immediately before these feasts, it is taken with great asceticism. If this occurs on a Saturday or Sunday, then fasting starts on Friday to allow complete abstention until sunset.

Notes on Periods of Fasting observed by the Copts:

1- Fasting is not observed on Wednesdays and Fridays occurring in the "Pentecostal Period," i.e., the fifty days starts from Easter to Pentecost.

2- The sick and travelers may reduce the periods set for fasting by absolution during confession. As for those who observe asceticism, they may fast all their lives and follow no restrictions. Upon consecration, a bishop fasts for a complete year.

Man's words proclaim his inner life, characteristics, personality, abilities and his gifts. Likewise church readings uncover her nature, thoughts, aims, and abilities.

CHURCH READINGS IN THE EARLY AGES

Jews used to pray daily liturgies besides the rites of the morning and evening sacrifices, especially on Saturdays and on feasts. The synagogue set certain readings especially for Saturdays.

We can summarize the contents of the daily Jewish liturgy in the days of Jesus Christ in the following points:

1. The president of the synagogue chooses one of the people to read the "Shema," i.e., the Jewish Creed which contains Deut. 6:49; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41, and the 18 blessings (On Saturday there are only 7 blessings).

2. A reading from the Pentateuch (five books of Moses) in Hebrew and in Aramaic.

3. A reading from the Prophets or other books.

4. If there was a suitable person or persons to preach, he (or they) did so (Acts 13:15).

† The Christians who had Jewish origin participated in these Jewish liturgies till the year A.D 60 (Acts 20:16).

† The Christian Church inherited from the synagogue the readings from the Scriptures that were suitable to the Christian mind.

9 In the second century, St. Justin stated that the church admitted readings from the Gospels and the apostolic writings.

9 In the second century there were certain church readings especially for feasts of Christian Pasch and Pentecost. Afterward other readings were set as those of the feasts of martyrs and of Sundays. [Many of the church Fathers mentioned the use of the two testaments in the church readiness.]

† Before the Council of Nicea, the church had one "Lectionary" or more.

THE FEATURES OF THE READINGS IN THE COPTIC CHURCH

First: Church readings can be divided into two kinds, each one revealing a side of the church nature:

1. Readings that present a general line throughout the year, starts with El-Nayrouz (the beginning of the Coptic year) and continue till the end of the year in a certain theological and spiritual manner. These readings throughout the whole year uncover the church curriculum and her spiritual ladder, and at the same time represent the church catholicity (universalism) and her unity.

2. Everyday readings, according to the feasts of the saints and other circumstances. These readings show the distinctive nature of a day and the other. According to us, this represents the distinction between church members, and the variety of their gifts. This distinction and variety complement the catholicity of the church and her unity.

We can call the first kind of readings: "The general line of church readings" while the other is called: "The special readings."

Second: Church readings are considered as a part of church worship, these readings are recited with special tones (in Coptic) to declare the purpose of the choice of the church from these readings. Through church readings, worshipers offer to God hymns of love. In other words, church readings are prayers, through them we hear God's voice and talk to Him secretly. These readings are a dialogue of love between God and His people, therefore there is no church worship without biblical readings. Church readings are used not only through the daily Eucharistic liturgy but also in evening (Vesper), and morning(Matins) offerings, also through different liturgies such as the funeral services. Even in the canonical hours, every time we pray, the Psalms are mixed with certain readings from the New Testament.

Third: Church readings in the Eucharistic liturgy are not set by distributing the chapters of the two Testaments throughout the year, but the church chooses by the guidance of the Holy Spirit certain chapters to present an integral spiritual and theological curriculum. This curriculum is in accordance with church occasions, hymns and rites throughout the year, aiming at the edification of the holy community.

Fourth: Besides the readings from the two testaments which are in accordance with the church hymns, there are other readings from the traditional and patristic writings, such as:

1. The "Synixarum": It contains the biographies of saints and God's actions with the church throughout the ages.

2. The "Difnar": It contains doxologies to God who acted in the life of the saint whose feasts we celebrate. This book is no longer used in most of our churches.

3. Patristic sermons like those of St. John Chrysostom. Today most of our churches suffice with a sermon preached by one of the clergymen.

CHURCH READINGS BOOKS

There are many "Lectionaries" that contain selected chapters from the Holy Bible, used in the Eucharistic liturgy, vespers and matins:

1. General Lectionary: contains readings for Sundays and ordinary days throughout the year. It is divided according to the Coptic months.

2. Lectionary for the Great Lent.

3. Lectionary for the Holy Week (Paschal Week).

4. Lectionary for the Pentecostal period (the period between Easter and Pentecost).

THE GENERAL LINE FOR THE GENERAL CHURCH

READINGS

Besides everyday readings (special church readings of the Days), the general church readings through the Coptic year present an integral church curriculum as an evangelic, ascetic, theological and eschatological (heavenly) one and at the same time it does not ignore our practical everyday life on earth.

The general church readings are for the followings periods:

1. From El-Nayrouz feast (the beginning of the Coptic Year) to the feast of the Cross (1:17 Tout): The readings of this period concentrate on joy, chanting hymns and the constant renewal; the first verse that is read in the eve of El-Nayrouz is: "Sing to the Lord a new song." Truly, repentance is the way to the kingdom of God, but when repentance is mixed with hope, it is practiced through per petual inner joy.

The analogy between El-Nayrouz (Feast of Martyrs) and the feast of the Cross. Using a joyful (Farayhi) tone throughout this period confirms the joyful life of the suffering church, for she joyfully bears the cross together with her Heavenly Groom.

2. The preparation for Christmas (Nativity of Christ)

CHURCH READINGS BOOKS

There are many "Lectionaries" that contain selected chapters from the Holy Bible, used in the Eucharistic liturgy, vespers and matins:

1. General Lectionary: contains readings for Sundays and ordinary days throughout the year. It is divided according to the Coptic months.

2. Lectionary for the Great Lent.

3. Lectionary for the Holy Week (Paschal Week).

4. Lectionary for the Pentecostal period (the period between Easter and Pentecost).

THE GENERAL LINE FOR THE GENERAL CHURCH

READINGS

Besides everyday readings (special church readings of the Days), the general church readings through the Coptic year present an integral church curriculum as an evangelic, ascetic, theological and eschatological (heavenly) one and at the same time it does not ignore our practical everyday life on earth.

The general church readings are for the followings periods:

1. From El-Nayrouz feast (the beginning of the Coptic Year) to the feast of the Cross (1:17 Tout): The readings of this period concentrate on joy, chanting hymns and the constant renewal; the first verse that is read in the eve of El-Nayrouz is: "Sing to the Lord a new song." Truly, repentance is the way to the kingdom of God, but when repentance is mixed with hope, it is practiced through per petual inner joy.

The analogy between El-Nayrouz (Feast of Martyrs) and the feast of the Cross. Using a joyful (Farayhi) tone throughout this period confirms the joyful life of the suffering church, for she joyfully bears the cross together with her Heavenly Groom.

2. The preparation for Christmas (Nativity of Christ in Keyahk 29): The church fasts for 43 days before Christmas, and presents readings which concentrate on "God's friendship with man" realized by the divine incarnation.

3. The correlation between the feasts of Christmas, Circumcision and Epiphany (The Baptism of Jesus Christ): The readings of these feasts announce that our Friend became like us, submitted Himself to the Law and was circumcised. He also entered with us into. the Jordan River, was baptized to lift us up to the spiritual circumcision, changing our friendship to Him unto the "Adoption to God", that we might become "members of the household of God" Eph. 2:19.

In other words, the "divine friendship'' (Christmas) can be realized through two integral actions: descent of the Word of God unto, us (His circumcision like us), and lifting us up to Him by His Holy Spirit (our spiritual circumcision or our baptism). He became like us, subjected Himself to the Law which He issued, that we might become like Him, children of His Holy Father!

4. "Jonah's Pasch": Our adoption to God is realized through "passing over" (Pasch), for we have to die with Christ, be buried with Him (as if we were in the belly of the great fish), that we might reign with Him and enjoy the new life [the word "Pasch" means "Passover"].

The readings of the fasting and of the "Pasch" of Jonah represent a call to believers that they might read the books of the Old Testament in a new concept, through the events of the Christian Pasch, i.e., the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

5. The readings of Great Lent, on Sundays and ordinary days in Lent. These readings, from the Old and New Testaments, have their particular features, for they urge us to accept the true and practical communion with Christ, our Pasch, who was slain for our sake.

6. The readings of the Holy Week, i.e., the readings of the period from Saturday of Lazarus till Easter. These readings are considered the center of all church readings, for through them the church follows all the events of salvation hour by hour, to declare the mystery of the redeeming divine love from the Old and New Testaments, so that believers might live in these events with all their hearts and senses and lastly enjoy the delight of Christ's resurrection

7. The Pentecostal Period, with its readings and joyful (Farayhi) hymns reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, which in its essence is the enjoyment of communion with the Risen Christ, who is in heavens.

8. The Feast of the Apostles (5th of Abib 12 July): It is the feast of preaching and ministering unceasingly, and the feast of the acceptance of the apostolic life.

9. The Feast of St. Mary (16 Misra 22 August): It declares the glories that a believer might attain by his unity with the Glorious Christ, revealed in a unique way in St. Mary as the excellent member among the believers. It also assures the communion of saints.

10. The preparation for El-Nayrouz: In the last two weeks of the Coptic year, church readings attract our sight and mind towards the events of the end of the world and Christ's last advent. Church readings prepare the believers to sing: "Yes; Come O Lord Jesus."

In brief, the frame of the general curriculum of the church is:

1. It starts with the spiritual joy in the Lord together with the desire of the continual renewal, as a base for our spiritual life (Feast of El-Nayrouz till the feast of the Cross c.II September up to c. 27 September).

2. This joy is based on God's friendship and love towards men (Christmas or the Feast of the Nativity of Christ - 7 January).

3. God's love and friendship were realized through His participating in our nature, that we may also participate in Jesus' sonship by the spirit of adoption (Feasts of Circumcision and Epiphany - 19 January).

4. This sonship is realized by passing over from bondage through the Pasch, the center of the Old Testament (Jonah's Pasch).

5. The Old Pasch is a symbol of our True Pasch, the Crucified and Risen Christ (The Great Lent).

6. We have to accept the practical communion with our Pasch by participating in His crucifixion so that we might attain the delight and power of His resurrection (The Holy Week).

7. We have to accept the eschatological (heavenly) thought, that we might not miss the inner kingdom (The Pentecostal period).

8. As we attain communion with God we must witness to Him by preaching (The Feast of the Apostles).

9. Our communion with God leads us to the communion with our brothers and unites us with His saints (The Feast of St. Mary).

10 Our experience of the communion with God and with our brothers inflames our desire for the Lord's last advent, to enjoy the heavenly and eternal communion in the perfect glories (The end of the year).



Through the above mentioned summary we remark that the Coptic Church presents through the general readings an integral thought about God's love and His redeeming work. It also presents our responsibility for the spiritual struggling, meditation on the heavenly glories accompanied by accepting sufferings joyfully, attaining the mysteries of the word of God together with preaching and witnessing, and attaining the communion with God and His son by His Holy Spirit through our communion altogether in Him.

ONE WORSHIPPING LIFE

In his daily life, conduct and worship, the believer bears an integral indivisible life, either life "in Christ" or "out of Christ." When he enjoys his life "In Christ," his fellowship in public worship is complimented by practicing his unseen private worshipping; as both represent one devotional life. In other words, sharing the church liturgies with the congregation, a believer fortifies his spiritual life when he goes into his private room and shuts the doors of his senses. Thus when he is among the group physically, his heart, mind and soul are at liberty in heavens meeting and conversing intimately with God as though the universe embraces none but them both. And when he enters into his private room, closes the outer door and pours forth in front of God in a true spiritual worship he holds the whole world -in his heart; I mean the whole human race praying for them and seeking their prayers on his behalf While he is in his room he feels he is inside the church that unites a host of spiritual militants with the victorious including the heavenly hosts.

In the fight of this concept we cannot draw a dividing line that separates between church life and private worshipping life, because the church is every believer holding firmly together with his brethren in the One Head.

That is why in the present time, due to housing problems in Egypt, when a believer does not find a private room to pray in solitude, he stands or bows in prayer in the presence of the family members. He does not abstain from praying because he does not have a private locked room. His room is already inside him if he chooses to shut out his senses.

PRIVATE OR INDIVIDUAL WORSHIP?

Individuality is non-existent in our Church's dictionary. The spirit of individuality and isolation has been eliminated in the human loving Christ, that we might live in the spirit of collective love even if we were in our private rooms. This I have clarified frequently while talking about monasticism and monarchism. Hence monasticism is not an inner isolation from the community, or a practice of individual life, but it is a unity with God, the Lover-of-mankind.

PRIVATE WORSHIP

In the Coptic Church, the believer practices many private forms of worships of which we mention:

1. The Canonical Hours (the Agbia prayers): The early church took after the Jewish Church the system of dividing the days into hours of prayers. Many of the Copts pray Matins and Compline and some pray Midnight. When they have the chance they pray other prayers.

We need to notice the following in the Canonical Hours prayers:

a. Every prayer is called "song of praise," as though the church is calling on her children to lead a life of joy if possible all the hours of their life, day and night.

b. In every hour the church offers us the memory of a certain phase of God's redeeming work. The "Matin" song of praise reminds us of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and our daily resurrection to begin a new life in Him. The Terce (praise of the third hour) reminds us of the coming upon the church of the Holy Spirit of God, the Giver of perpetual renewal and holiness. In the Text we remember the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, while in the None (ninth hour) we remember the death in the flesh of our Lord and the acceptance of the right hand thief, in Paradise. In the Vespers (sunset) we remember the removing of our Lord's Body from the cross, giving thanks for concluding the day, and asking Him that we might spend the night in peace. In Compline we remember the burial of the Body of our Lord watching for the end of our sojourn on earth... yet in the three midnight prayers we await for the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

c. The hourly songs of praise begins with giving thanks to God after the Lord's prayer, then submitting our repentance (Psalms 50 [51]), followed by praise with Psalms.

2. Besides the prayers or the praises of the Canonical Hours the believer practices his private talk with God; one time praising, another time thanking and a third time contending and a fourth time asking and pleading. It is worthy of the believer to be openhearted. He would not focus in his prayers upon his personal needs but ask for all if possible: for his beloved as well as his antagonists, for his acquaintances as well as for strangers, for believers as well as nonbelievers.

3. It is worthy of a believer also to practice "kneeling" (Metanias), as a sign of contrition and repentance. The believer trains himself to practice "kneeling" for the salvation of others.

4. Preoccupation with God through the day, that is "prayer of calling Jesus' name". Which is called the "arrow prayer," in which the believer cries out from moment to moment with a short prayer calling the name of our Lord Jesus Christ as an arrow to strike with, the snares of our enemy Satan. This action, simple as it is, has its own effectiveness in the life and worship of the believer.

5. Praises, glorification and beatification: some believers practice church hymns daily or on feasts as a private worship in their bedrooms. Here we need to mention that some Copts prefer setting up a special corner for prayer. If this is not easy to do we find that many icons decorate their homes as a sign of their longing for holy life in God and fellowship with the saints.