

**PRAISE (TASBEHA),
THE VESPERS,
AND
THE MATINS**

SHARING IN ANGELIC WORSHIP

1995

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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*



**His Grace Bishop Daniel
Bishop of Sydney and Affiliated Regions**

THE BEGINNING OF THE HEAVENLY PATH

The Eucharist is a journey for the whole Church - clergy and lay people alike - towards heaven; it is a unique, enjoyable, joyful, holy and yet fearful journey. In this journey, the Holy Spirit carries us to the throne of Grace, where we find the open arms of the Father for us, His children. We meet the Victim Lamb, in Whom we abide and Who abides in us, giving to us His Body and Blood so that we may share His holy characteristics.

The journey begins with what is called "Praise" (Tasbeha), "the Vespers and Matins." We begin on the heavenly path by entering into an angelic atmosphere that lifts up our hearts, thoughts and senses and elevates us towards the Heavenly King Himself.

I do not wish to go into intellectual studies concerning the Praise, the Vespers and the Matins, but wish that the Holy Spirit may elevate us to the heavenly path itself, so that we may attain the practical knowledge and taste it!



PRAISE (*TASBEHA*)

PRAISE AND THE EUCHARIST

When we examine praise, the Vespers, and the Matins - which consist of prayers, thanksgiving, supplications, readings, honoring of the saints, and intercessions on behalf of every human soul with the spirit of repentance - we find this to be the church's entry to the Eucharist. Moreover, if we consider all of this effort to be a spiritual struggle, we recognize that the Eucharist is like a reward for our spiritual efforts, where we accept the Heavenly King, Who was crucified, rose from the dead, and dwells within us; He gives us his Body and His Blood so that we can live through Him and with Him, until we meet Him face to face!

It is important for us to understand the following spiritual facts:

1. *Praise is the beginning as well as the end point of the Eucharist service.* We begin the service with praise, we practice it with praise, and we end it with praise. Praise is not just an introduction but the beginning and the end of the road, because our way is the Lord Christ, the Beginning and the End; He is *our continual Feast* and the source to our joy and unceasing praise. Daily praise prepares the soul to receive the King and for our unity with Him, and it ignites the soul with the spirit of joy and rejoicing. It is as if *praise prepares us for enjoyment of the Eucharist, and the Eucharist propels us towards unceasing daily praise.*

2. **Praise** in its broad sense is not just singing certain sections from written or Church praises in specific tunes. *It is a sign of victory in the life of the Church and all human existence.* The souls that rejoice in their Christ think about the throne that the Holy One sits on, as the psalmist says "But You are Holy, Who inhabit the praises of Israel" (Psalms 22:3).

The Church as a heavenly bride shares in the work of the heavenly beings, meaning unceasing praise! Every day the Church practices the *Prayers of the Canonical Hours*, day and night in the spirit of praise, singing "*Praise of the Prime, Terce, or Sext hour, etc.*" The Church similarly conducts itself in the spirit of the psalmist who says, "Seven times a day *I praise You*" (Psalms 119:164).

Jeremiah the prophet used to praise the Lord in the midst of his troubles, and asked everyone to praise, "Sing to the Lord! **Praise the Lord!** For He has delivered the life of the poor from the hand of evildoers" (Jeremiah 20:13).

Daniel the prophet also in the midst of his troubles praised, "he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and **gave thanks** before his God" (Daniel 6:10).

St. Paul and St. Silas, the two imprisoned apostles, "were praying and *singing hymns* to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25).

In praise we witness the work of the Bible and preach it; thus "*they shall proclaim* the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6), and "*I will declare* Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation *I will sing praise to You*" (Hebrews 2:12).

Even the *biblical lections* are read with the spirit of praise, whether it is the Psalms, Pauline Epistles, Catholic Epistles, or the Holy Bible.

We praise the Lord not only in public worship but even in quiet, personal moments, as St. Athanasius says, "The rested soul forgets its pains, and by singing holy words looks with joy to Christ alone!"

PRAISE IS CONTINUAL SACRIFICE

Praise is not only preparation for the Eucharist service but also *a holy sacrifice that ties our daily life with the sacrifice of the*

Eucharist, or the sacrifice of Christ Whose rejoicing is His suffering and crucifixion. As the apostle said, "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame... therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 12:2 and 13:15). David the prophet also called praise a sacrifice (Psalms 27:6; 116:17; 50:14; 141:2).

St. Justin the Martyr says, "Prayers and thanksgiving can be considered offerings of complete sacrifice which are accepted by God²." He also says, "the unique honor that is befitting of God is not burnt offerings; but to honor Him... by giving thanks through praise and hymns because He is our Creator³."

PRAISE IS A COMMUNAL AND CHURCH WORK

Praise is the human being's response to the love of God, so our feelings, senses, thoughts, and desires become like strings of a lyre expressing a tune of love that matches the supreme love of God. This response is apparent during public worship in church or personal worship in a private room, even during sleep and work.

It is important to realize that praise is not a single individual's job, but a joint effort for everyone - the victorious and the struggling - with the tunes of heavenly beings, even as we sleep:

"Before the *angels* I will sing praises to You" (Psalm 138).

"Praise Him in all His *Saints*" (Psalm 150).

"In the midst of the congregation I will praise You" (Psalm 22).

In heaven the believer shares with the Church in its eternal glorification and praise; he or she does not praise in a solitary tone. Thus, the practice of praise and all the liturgies reveals to the believers their membership in the Church, makes them aware that they are not only joining in church services but are an inseparable part of her, a natural fruit of the Holy Spirit. During the Pentecost,

"those who gladly received his word were baptized... so continuing daily with *one accord* in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, *praising God...* and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2).

PRAISE IN THE RITES OF THE CHURCH AND DAILY LIFE

Some observe that praise in the rites of the Coptic Church is very long compared to the Eucharist service. Besides the praise of the daily Canonical Hours, the Church practices praise before the Vespers, then the praise of Midnight which continues late in the night, followed by the praise of the Matins, etc. The feeling that these rites are long is because we do not practice praise in our daily life, neither in word nor with our hearts.

Until recently in some cities, like Naqadah which is known for textiles, the majority of people repeated praises as they worked at home, each family leaving their doors open so that they could share with one another in praise. In villages, the workers in the fields daily practice praise in a loud voice as they farm, creating an atmosphere of joy. We hear that when hermits, monks and pilgrims meet, they do not speak of others but share in praise during their entire encounter.

Thus, praise is not a specific church function, but the daily work of every Christian, at home and in church. With this spirit, the believers used to meet together, every day when possible, but especially on the eve of Sunday, to spend as much of their time sharing in praise, participating in:

1. the Praise of Vespers.
2. Vespers.
3. Midnight praise.
4. The Praise of Matins.
5. Matins.
6. The service of the Divine Liturgy with its two parts:

- a. The Liturgy of the Catechumens.
- b. The Liturgy of the Faithful.

THE PRAISE OF VESPERS

When the believers meet for Vespers, they offer praise as follows:

First: The prayers (praise) of the Canonical Hours - the None, Vespers and Compline. If it is a day of fasting, only the Vespers and Compline are prayed.

Second: The hymn of "*All you nations*" Psalm 117 (116 LXX) which calls on all the nations to praise:

*O praise the Lord, all you nations!
Laud Him, all you peoples!
For His merciful kindness is great toward us,
And the truth of the Lord endures forever. Alleluia!*

Third: The **fourth period** consists of three psalms (148, 149, and 150). Some consider that these praises were originally the "*Prayer of the Dawn*," which was used in Vespers just as it was added to the Midnight Prayer; the Prayer of the Prime has since taken its place.

Psalm 148 is an invitation for all creation to share in praise: an invitation for heavenly beings, the stars, the planets, the waters and all creation. It is an invitation to the kings and the people, and to the young and old, even the children. It is an invitation for everyone to praise the Lord:

*Praise the Lord from the heavens; Alleluia...
Praise Him, all His angels; Alleluia...
Praise Him, sun and moon; Alleluia...
Let them praise the name of the Lord, Alleluia...*

This is the spirit of the church since its beginning, inviting everyone and everything to praise, even the material creation. This is a biblical thought for the Psalmist declares that the waters praise God (Psalms 93:3, 4; 148:4), and the heavens and stars praise Him (Psalm 19:1).

It is notable that the first church hymn recorded on musical notes dates back to the second century and is called the "Hymn of Oxyrhynchus," or the hymn of Bahnasa, which was discovered in Bahnasa in upper Egypt⁴; it states the following:

*All of God's great creations can not stand silent!
Nor can the stars that carry the light hide.
All the waves that fill the rivers praise the Father, the Son
and the Holy Spirit,
And all the powers share with them. Amen. Amen...*

Psalm 149 is an invitation for God's holy people to offer new praise to the Holy One:

*Sing to the Lord a new song. Alleluia...
Let Israel rejoice their Maker. Alleluia.
Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. Alleluia.
Let them praise His name with the dance. Alleluia.
Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.
Alleluia.
For the Lord takes pleasure in his people. Alleluia.
He will beautify the humble with salvation. Alleluia.
Let the saints be joyful in glory. Alleluia...*

With a new heart and a nature of continual renewal God's holy people praise continuously, for our encounter with the Holy One drives us to offer new praise that never ages or wears out!

Psalm 150 is an invitation for every individual to share in praise together:

*Praise God in His saints (sanctuary). Alleluia...
Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet. Alleluia.
Praise Him with psaltery (lute) and harp. Alleluia...
Praise Him with timbrel and dance. Alleluia...
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Alleluia.*

Thus all humanity, its talent, and its actions are considered like musical instruments for praising God.

Fourth: The *Epsaliah of the day* (or of a feast), meaning a *hymn*, is similar to a poem in which each section or paragraph is arranged alphabetically. It resembles a heart-felt prayer through which the believers repeat the name of Christ in a holy focused prayer.

Fifth: The *Theotokion of the day*, popularly referred to as "*Tazakia*," is beatification of the Theotokos. It is a theological piece, full of the spirit of the Holy Bible, confirming that the One born from the Virgin is God, the Logos.

Sheres: "Hail to... " is blessedness to the Holy Virgin because:

- a. She offers us a living example of the abundance of God's grace to human life.
- b. She illuminates the living understanding of the Church, which accepts the the abundance of God's grace.
- c. She possesses a preeminent motherhood and love.

The *Ending of the Theotokia* is addressed to the Lord Christ, ascertaining that in honoring the saints, our attention is focused onto Christ, the Head of the Church, and through Whom everyone is sanctified by His Holy Spirit.

The *tone of the Praise* on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays is the tone of "*Adam*," which is the first word in the *Theotokion* of Monday. On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays the "*Watus*" tone is used; the latter means "bush" which is the first word of the *Theotokion* of Tuesday.



THE VESPERS

PRAISE, PETITIONS, AND INTERCESSIONS

In an extraordinary and unique way the Church assembles to begin with the prayers of the Canonical Hours, then sings Praise, and finally the Vespers. This three part worship provides us the ability to worship in a true biblical spirit. *We realize that it must practice unceasing worship every hour of our sojourn in this world, praying in a communal and collective spirit, and through love forgetting to ask for oneself what is asked on behalf of others.*

First: In the **Prayers of the Canonical Hours** (the None, Vespers and Compline), the believers declare that they devote all the daylight and evening hours of their sojourn to praising God, becoming like the angels and longing to change their life into one of unceasing praise.

Second: During the **Praise of the Vespers**, the church invites all the nations to come and share in praise, just as the heavenly and earthy beings are all invited to participate.

The church asks the nations to join the joyful body of the Lord, so that everyone becomes part of one church composed of heavenly and earthy beings. The invitation is even for the material creation like the stars, the trees, the water, the mountains and the hills, etc. to participate in praising the Creator.

Third: The Vespers begins with the same understanding. The purpose of this rite is for man to forget himself in love for God and other people; he desires the forgiveness of sins for all mankind, not for himself but for everyone else, even for those who have reposed (passed away). The rite of the Vespers is in reality the church interceding on behalf of every member and the whole world, even those who have reposed. This is what we should experience during the Vespers as well as the Matins.

THE VESPERS AND MATINS THE OFFERING OR RAISING OF INCENSE

Some have asked, "**When did the use of incense begin in the Christian Church?**"

Some scholars believe that the use of incense began only after the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D). This position is supported by the absence of references to incense in the Euchologion of St. Serapion the Copt (a friend of Pope Athanasius), as well as in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

This opinion is not acceptable for the following reasons:

First: It is necessary to make the distinction between the use of incense in Christian spiritual worship as an expression of offering what is in the heart as burnt offering, a sweet-smelling incense that ascends towards the divine throne, and the use of incense by the Jews as a daily service in the temple, and the offering of incense by pagans in their idol worship while denying Christ.

The apostles joined the daily temple service and they never thought to abandon it except when they were forced away. This service consisted of the singing of psalms, readings from the Old Testament, praise, petitions, and the offering of incense. It was said,

"So *continuing daily* with one accord in the temple" (Acts 2:46).

"Now Peter and John went up together *to the temple* at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1).

They entered the temple daily to share in worship and to witness for the Lord Christ, for it is written, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

The offering of incense was not like animal sacrifice which was symbolism that ended when Lord Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice. It was said of the heavenly service, "the four living creatures and the twenty four presbyters fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp and golden bowls *full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*" (Revelation 5:8).

Second: The Lord Christ Himself joined the daily temple service until the eve of His crucifixion. "And when they had sung an hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30).

Third: The psalmist says, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141:2). God Himself confirmed the use of incense with the offerings of the holy Eucharist from the nations "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My Name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My Name, and a pure offering; for My Name shall be great among the nations,' said the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 1:11).

Fourth: Incense was referred to in the New Testament as heavenly angelic work, "Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. And he was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne" (Revelation 8:3).

PUBLIC WORSHIP

The Coptic liturgy is characterized by a communal spirit, for the role of the congregation (people) in the liturgies is vital and essential. For this reason the church does not recognize secretive liturgies that priests practice without the people.

For a long time ago, all the people used to reply, and there were not any designated singers (deacons who lead the people) until weakness developed in the church. We therefore find that concerning the responses church books specify, "the people reply"

not "the deacons reply." Truly successful deacons blend their voices with the people in perfect harmony. Separation of the deacons' voice from the people is a sign of weakness that needs correction. When one deacon's voice stands out (sometimes referred to as the teacher) from the others, this a deviation that should avoided, for we do not find in the Divine Liturgy anything that calls for a solo response from any deacon outside the altar.

We should also note that the word "liturgy" is formed from two parts: the first part "*lio*" means "the people" and the second "*gia*" means "work." Thus the liturgy is collective public worship and not that of a single priest or deacon.

INAUDIBLE PRAYER

Even with the church's emphasis on collective public worship, it does not ignore the role of the personal, whether priest, deacon, or member of the congregation. The church looks at the priest as a man of prayer, whose mouth and heart do not stop praying from the time he enters the church until the time he leaves. The priest is continuously praying during the Vespers and the Matins, the readings, the preparation of the altar, etc. until the people depart.

The church means for the priest to be continually occupied in his thoughts with short prayers that he repeats without stopping. While offering incense during Vespers, the priest inaudibly repeats "The blessing of the Vespers, may its holy blessings be upon us. Amen." While offering incense during Matins, he repeats, "The blessing of the Matins, may its holy blessings be upon us. Amen." During the incense of the Pauline epistle, he repeats, "The blessing of Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, may his holy blessing be upon us. Amen." During the incense of the *Apraxis* (Acts), he repeats, "The blessing of our fathers the apostles, our father Peter, our teacher Paul and the rest of the apostles, may their holy blessing be upon us. Amen."

As for the priest, he has many silent prayers.

† † †

SPIRITUAL CODES FOR OF THE RITE OF THE VESPERS AND MATINS

If we get away from the details and look at the practice of the Vespers and Matins from the beginning to the end, we find a beautiful picture or a living icon of heavenly life in the midst of the worldly reality in which we live. There is no separation between the heavenly experience where the Spirit of God elevates us to the divine throne to worship with the heavenly beings, and the feeling of an obligation towards every human soul and to ask for the needs of the whole world.

Without ignoring the Coptic liturgy's confirmation of the primary and essential role of the people in the services, we can understand the principal elements of the practice of the Vespers and the Matins from the prayers of the bishop, when he is present; it shows us the role of this rite in the life of the believers:

1. The opening of the altar curtain = enjoyment of a heavenly experience.
2. The prayer of Thanksgiving = enjoyment of a thankful nature.
3. The prayer of "*ephnoti nai nan ...* God, have mercy upon us" = intercession on behalf of everyone.
4. The reading (singing) of the Bible = immersion into God's Word.
5. The sermon = the continual need for learning.
6. The Litany for the Congregation = the presence of God amongst His people.
7. The Absolution = the need for the forgiveness of sins.

According to the Coptic rite these seven prayers and praises are followed by the bishop, when present, and they reveal

the different and complete basis in the rite of the Vespers and the Matins:

First: The aim of the rite is for us to become acquainted with heaven, not the knowledge of sermons or discussions, but first and foremost the practical knowledge and the taste of its pledge. The bishop or the priest *opens the altar curtain* after he removes his head dress, asking everyone to enter to heaven and dwell in it. The word "altar" in Coptic comes from word for "heaven." We say in a certain part of the Prayer of the Terce, "As we stand in Your holy sanctuary, we stand in heaven." **St. John Chrysostom** says, "when you see the altar curtain open, be sure then that heaven has been opened in its heights^s."

Thus all the believers lift up their hearts with the priest as he opens the altar curtain, saying:

*Have mercy upon us O God the Father, the Pantocrator.
O Holy Trinity have mercy upon us.
O Lord, the **God of powers** be with us,
Forthere is no helper in our needs but You.*

It is as if each time the believer shares in the Vespers and Matins, he declares that in the midst of difficulties and troubles he always finds, through the mercy of the Holy Trinity, the doors of heaven open, realizing that he has joined the heavenly powers as a righteous soldier of Jesus Christ. This is why he likes the title "*Lord, the God of powers*" and asks "*be with us.*"

Second: The bishop or priest prays the **Prayer of Thanksgiving**, for God does not accept our prayers as sweet smelling incense unless they come from a thankful heart. An ungrateful heart stands as a barrier to the incense ascending beyond the roof of the church, but thankfulness makes the soul like incense that no one can prevent from reaching God's throne.

Third: The prayer of "*ephnoti nai nan*;" the bishop or priest takes the cross and three lighted candles, stands in humility, and raises his hands in prayer:

*God have mercy upon us,
Settle Your mercy upon us* (making the sign of the cross towards the east).

Have compassion upon us.

Hear us (crossing the north).

Bless us (crossing the west).

Guard us (crossing the south).

And help us (crossing the east).

Take away Your anger from us,

Visit us with Your salvation, and forgive us our sins.

That is how the whole church seeks refuge in the crucified Christ, who enlightens the world, and asks for the mercy, blessing and forgiveness of sins from east to west.

Fourth: The **reading of the Holy Bible**; the job of the bishop or priest is to be hidden in the Word of God, so that God Himself might speak to His people and that everyone may be blessed with the gospel of salvation. It is not read but is sung for it is a song of God's love to His Church; both the clergy and people experience continual rejoicing in Him.

Fifth: The **sermon**; the Church is like a mother in that she offers spiritual nourishment to her children for their spiritual growth. In the sermon, the bishop or priest is addressing himself first before others. As St. Ambrose says, everyone except God alone needs teaching while he teaches. This is the feeling of a well-known bishop, that he is in need of learning every day.

Six: The **Litany for the Congregation**; the priest asks God to bless His people with His presence amongst them.

Seventh: The **Absolution**; in this heavenly atmosphere, everyone, bishop together with the priests and people, feel the need for the forgiveness of sins. For this reason the bishop (or priest) asks God to grant him and everyone present the forgiveness of sins, so that everyone leaves the service having shed all their

problems and sins at the feet of the Savior. They leave as if on wings to practice a heavenly life during their sojourn on earth.

The preceding are the principal elements of the rite of the Vespers and Matins in Christian worship.

It is worship in an opened heaven, after having been blessed with a new thankful nature.

It is worship to open mankind's heart with love, and prayers for all mankind.

It is worship to be hidden in the joyful Word of God, and feel the need for continual learning.

It is worship to shed every sin at the feet of the Savior, so that man can ascend like a light cloud towards heaven!



THE RITE OF THE VESPERS AND MATINS

AND ITS THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTENT

FIRST: THE OPENING OF THE ALTAR CURTAIN

We already pointed out that when the priest opens the altar curtain, he calls on everyone to ascend towards heaven to see the glory of the Holy Trinity. Concerning **St. John Saba**, it was said that when he opened the altar curtain he would frequently stand silently. Once he stood for almost three hours; one of his disciples found out that he did not dare to enter the sanctuary because he saw the presence of God's glory on the altar with indescribable majesty.

This rite is accompanied by feeling the need for *reconciling between God and His people*. The priest asks for reconciliation with God through the mercy of the Holy Trinity (as we saw) and kneels in humility in front of the altar saying, "*We worship You O Christ with your Good Father and the Holy Spirit, because You have come and saved us.*"

He then asks for reconciliation with the people by bowing in front of the people and clergy with a *metania*, or bowing, and kisses his brothers the other clergy and says, "*I have sinned, forgive me.*"

It is impossible to participate in worship without the spirit of love, humility and forgiveness. The Lord says, "And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). Paul the apostle also says, "Therefore I desire that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Timothy 2:8).

SECOND: THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING (with the offering of incense)

Upon every occasion, whether in communal or personal prayer, we must remember the abundance of God's grace, so we offer God our thanks.

1. On every condition.
2. For His salvation ("*for You have protected us*").
3. For giving us the chance to pray ("*and brought us to this hour*").

4. The church does not forget to thank God Who gave her authority to tread upon Satan, but with a spirit of humility not conceit. The priest prays saying,

"... for it is You Who have given us the authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy. And lead us not into temptation..."

The deacon asks the people to pray for God's mercy and compassion, and that He may accept the prayers and supplications of the saints that carry the struggling church and do not stop praying for the salvation of her members. He says "*Pray that God has mercy and compassion upon us, ... and accepts the supplications and prayers of His saints, for that which is good, on our behalf, at all times, and forgives our sins.*"

THIRD: THE FIVE HANDFULS OF INCENSE

After the Prayer of Thanksgiving, the priest then *puts five handfuls of incense* as he thanks the Holy Trinity:

- * The first hand: "*Blessed be God the Father, the Pantocrator.*"
- * The second hand: "*Blessed be His Only-Begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus.*"
- * The third hand: "*Blessed be the Holy Spirit,*" Who sanctifies our lives.
- * The fourth hand: The doxology "*Glory to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*"
- * The fifth hand: Unending gratitude, "*Now, and at all times and forevermore.*"

The five hands most probably represent five oblations (offerings); the priest prays inaudibly (during the offering of morning incense) "*O God Who has received the gifts of Abel the righteous, the sacrifices of Noah and Abraham, and the incense of Aaron and Zechariah.*"

Each of these offerings had its own significance:

* *Abel's gifts*: the offering of the choice firstlings to God (Genesis 4:4, 5).

* *Noah's sacrifice*: this reminds us of the renewal of the world by water through sacrifice (Genesis 8).

* *Abraham's sacrifice*: the entry into a covenant with God.

* *Aaron's incense*: this is linked to the lighting of the lamps in the morning and evening (Exodus 30:1-8), reminding us of the aim of prayer which is enlightenment.

* *Zachariah's incense*: the opening of heaven and enjoyment of the service of angels (Luke 1:5-13). Incense is linked to the Cross, so the priest inaudibly prays,

"May our prayers rise straight before You as incense. The raising of our hands as an evening sacrifice. For You are the true evening sacrifice, Who offered Yourself for our sins on the honored Cross, according to the will of Your Good Father..."

FOURTH: THE CENSING OF THE ALTAR

The priest with the deacon goes turn around the altar three times, confirming that our prayers are offered to the Holy Trinity through the sacrifice of the Cross (the altar).

The following should be noted during the censuring of the altar:

1. The priest alternates in offering incense around the altar first while facing east, and then again when facing. During this he declares that he is offering incense to God on behalf of the entire church (facing east), and that he is offering the incense on behalf

of the clergy, the deacons and the people when he faces them (towards the west).

2. The priest censens with the censer over the altar three times in a circular fashion; the first time on the right of the altar, the second time to the left, and the third time in the middle... a reference to the offering of incense to the Holy Trinity Who is One God and one essence (the circle).

3. During the censuring, the priest inaudibly prays three short Litanies - for Peace, for the Fathers, and for the Congregation, while the deacon stands across from him on the opposite side of the altar.

FIFTH: THE OFFERING OF INCENSE AT THE SANCTUARY DOOR

1. The priest censens three times towards the east while bowing:

** We worship You O Christ with Your Good Father and the Holy Spirit, for You have come and saved us.*

** And through the abundance of Your mercy, I enter Your house and worship towards Your holy sanctuary.*

** I sing praises to You in front of the angels and worship towards Your holy sanctuary.*

These prayers are compatible with the biblical thinking of the church towards worship, which is offered to the Holy Trinity as individual worship using "I;" the believer feels the abundance of God's mercy as he enters His holy sanctuary, and participates with the heavenly beings (angels).

2. Censing towards the north (towards St. Mary), he says, "*We send You greetings with Gabriel the angel, saying: Hail to you, Who are full of grace, the Lord is with you.*" Here the incense is offered in the name of the entire triumphant church, which has enjoyed an abundance of God's grace. Because the Theotokos

became the exemplary and first member of the holy church, she is entitled to all blessedness! We ask for her prayers on our behalf!

Thus in every worship we always ask for the prayers of others on our behalf, especially those of the angels, the saints, and foremost St. Mary.

3. He then censes towards the people (west) and says, "*Hail to the hosts of angels, my masters the apostles, and to the ranks of martyrs and to all the saints.*"

It is as if the priest is asking for the prayers of the struggling church as he sees it in the heavenly Jerusalem, united with the angels, the apostles, the martyrs and all the saints.

4. He censes towards the south where the icon of St. John the Baptist located. The priest says, "*Hail to John the son of Zechariah. Hail to the priest the son of the priest,*" confirming the vital role of the men of the Old Testament as members of the church.

5. He again turns towards the east to end the offering in the name of our Savior Who accepts our prayers as sweet-scented incense: "**Let us worship our Savior the Lover of Mankind, for He had compassion on us and saved us.**"

SIXTH: THE HYMN OF THE CYMBALS

During the previous censuring inside and in front of the sanctuary, the people and the deacons sing the hymn of the cymbals, through which we glorify the Holy Trinity and beatify the heavenly beings and saints.

SEVENTH: LITANIES FOR THE DEPARTED, THE SICK AND THE TRAVELERS

During the Vespers the priest prays a *Litany for the Departed*, while during Matins he prays Litanies for the sick and those traveling. The deacon asks the people to remember the

names of those who have reposed, the sick, or those traveling during the Vespers and the Matins the priest and the people pray on behalf every human, even those who have reposed.

It is notable that almost every prayer, during Vespers or Matins, is offered with incense.

The following should be noted concerning these prayer:

1. The *Litany for the Departed* is said during the evening offering of incense because sunset always reminds us of our departure from this world. It is as though when we prepare to depart we think of those who departed before us, and we ask on their behalf for God's mercy, hoping that those who depart after us will similarly pray for us!

2. The *Litanies for the Sick and for Travelers* are said during the morning offering of incense because the church is like a hospital that opens its doors in the early morning to receive the sick, offering them the Lord Christ as both the Physician and Medicine at the same time. Similarly, the church feels the need of travelers for God's care from danger; traveling in the old days was limited to daytime (Psalm 104:22,23), especially in the early morning before the sun got very hot.

3. In the Matins on Sundays (or during feasts or sometimes at any day), the *Litany for the Oblations* is recited instead of the *Litany for Travelers* for it was forbidden to travel on the day of the Lord and people used to offer oblations, firstlings and gifts to Christ's Church.

In this prayer, the church prays for those who offer gifts by intention only, "*those who desire to offer to You but have none... give them the incorruptible instead of the corruptible, the heavenly instead of the earthly, and the eternal instead of the temporal. Fill their houses and stores with every good things.*" Thus the Church prays for all who are eager to give, even if unable, so that God may grant them heavenly and earthly blessings.

The church considers these offerings sacrifices of love that are linked to Christ's sacrifice; the priest prays, "**Accept them upon Your holy, heavenly altar**, as scented incense" for Paul the Apostle said, "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16).

4. During Saturday Matins, the *Litany for the Departed* is recited in lieu that for the Sick, in remembrance of the presence of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ in the tomb on Bright Saturday.

EIGHT: THE CIRCUIT OF THE VESPARS OR MATINS

The priest now performs what is called the circuit of Evening or Morning incense:

1. He begins by *censing around the altar inside the sanctuary one time*. Thus, prayers are not accepted unless the believer enters onto the heavenly altar through the sacrifice of the Cross.

2. The priest now offers incense at the sanctuary door in all four directions as described earlier.

a. Towards the east three times where we declare our submission to God our Savior.

b. Towards the north one time: beatifying St. Mary the intercessor as a mother full of kindness towards mankind, and as a vivid example for the soul that is aflame with a spirit that does not cease praying for everyone, even after her departure.

c. Towards the west (facing the people): beatifying the angels, martyrs, and saints from whom Christ's people are never separated.

d. Towards the south (directed towards the icon of St. John the Baptist): confirming our ties with the men of the Old Testament, as represented by St. John the Baptist who recognized the Lord Christ through faith even in the womb.

e. Again towards the east: just as we begin by worshipping God, we end with Him, for He is the beginning and the end of our lives.

3. In front of the **Holy Bible** whose letters hide the Divine Word, and to which we offer every honor and respect as a living worship.

4. In front of the **bishop and clergy**: We petition for them and ask for their petitions. This is what some call "*sharing in the priests' incense*." The priest feels the need for everyone's prayers for himself, as well as to open his heart to pray on behalf of everyone else: clergy and lay people.

His Grace Bishop Mettaos has a beautiful commentary on the censuring of the bishop: the incense is not offered to him, but rather for him to accept and raise it to God... in a similar fashion an organization which wants give a gift to the president chooses one of its leaders to present the gift. The incense is the prayers of the people that the priest or bishop present to God along with his own prayers⁶.

The bishop is censured three times, the hegumenos (protopriest) is censured twice, and the priest is censured once.

5. In front of the **icons**: This is offered to the Lord Christ as worship, but for the saints it is to honor them and ask for their prayers.

6. **Amidst the people**, the priest passes between them, as if he is collecting their silent prayers, which he carries along with the love in their hearts in an censer of love to be offered as sweet incense on the divine altar.

7. In front of the **Baptistry**.

8. When the priest approaches the **main entrance of the church**, he says "Jesus Christ of yesterday, today and forever: One Hypostasis Whom we worship and glorify" (cf. Hebrews 13:8). Perhaps, this because the priest feels that the Lord Christ in His

love has occupied the last rows of the church, so the priest glorifies Him Who stands behind His people, embracing and leading them into the arms of His Father or the holy altar. As the priest sees the people entering from the main west entrance he glorifies the Lord Christ Who said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

The priest stands for a few moments offering incense in front of the main entrance inside the church in the shape of the cross. It is as if he sees the entrance of the church as the mount of Golgotha on which the Lord's Cross was erected, through which the entire church is carried to heaven. The prayers of the priest as he censes offer the same meanings:

* From the east: "*He offered Himself as an acceptable sacrifice on the Cross for the salvation of our race*" (cf. Ephesians 5:2).

* From the north: "*And His Good Father accepted His sacrifice one evening on Golgotha.*"

* From the west: "*And He then opened the door of Paradise and brought back Adam once more to His Lordship.*"

* From the south: "*Through His Cross and His holy resurrection, He brought man back once more to Paradise.*"

9. The priest completes the circuit by heading back to the sanctuary, where he ascends to the altar and offers one hand of incense saying, "*Glory and honor, honor and glory to the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" He then censes over the altar while saying inaudibly the *Mystery of the People's Absolution*, asking God to accept their repentance and confession:

O God Who accepted the confession of the thief on the honored Cross, accept the confession of Your people. Forgive them all their sins for the sake of Your holy Name Which is called upon us. Let it be according to Your mercy, O Lord, and not according to our sins.

This prayer is also called the *Mystery of the Return*, because the priest offers it after he returns from censuring the nave.

It is to be noted that until recently the priest used to put his hand on the head of everyone present during the censuring circuit; he asked for God's blessing, acquainted himself with the people present, and took quick confessions. As for the people, they repeat silently "I ask You my Lord Jesus Christ to forgive my sins which I commit knowingly and unknowingly." It is as if the priest collects these confessions to present them at the Lord's altar during the "*Mystery of the People's Absolution*."

NINTH: THE DOXOLOGIES, THE CREED AND *EPHNOTI NAI NAN*

The people who have been singing doxologies now recite the Orthodox Creed, and the priest raises the cross with three candles *to ask for God's mercy* praying, "*Have mercy upon us O God*" or "*ephnoti nai nan*."

TENTH: THE LITANY FOR THE GOSPEL

The priest says the *Litany for the Gospel* as the deacon asks the people "pray for hearing the holy Gospel." This is so that praise introduces a chapter from the holy Gospel, the suitable fruit, requiring the prayers of both the priest and the people.

ELEVENTH: THE GOSPEL

Psalms are prayed in Coptic, while the priest puts one handful of incense goes around the altar with the deacon opposite him carrying the Gospel. The priest repeats the prayer of Simeon the Elder: "*Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.*"

When he finishes going around the altar, the priest censes in front of the holy Bible and presents the Gospel to the other clergy so that they may kiss it.

The deacon warns the people, "*Stand in the fear of God, and listen to the Holy Gospel.*"

As the deacon asks the people to listen with divine fear when they hear the divine Word, the priest in a joyful spirit praises God Who granted us His Word, the gift of victory. He offers triumphant praise to God, the "Lord of hosts," Who through the Bible gives the believers victory in their spiritual battle; he says, "*Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord of hosts.*"

This resembles the praise which the people uttered when the Lord Christ entered Jerusalem; and it is as if upon hearing the Word of the Bible we are blessed by the entry of our Christ to our hearts, His beloved Jerusalem and His royal palace.

TWELVTH: THE SERMON

Learning in the church is fundamental for growth in spiritual knowledge for the clergy and lay people.

THIRTEEN: THE FIVE SHORT LITANIES

The priest prays at the door of the sanctuary the *five short Litanies* for 1) Peace, 2) the Fathers, 3) the Place, 4) the Winds of heaven (or plants or water), and 5) the Gatherings. Along with the litanies the priest censes so that the prayers mingle with the incense.

FOURTEEN: THE THREE ABSOLUTIONS

The following should be noted in these absolutions:

1. In the first absolution, the priest asks for the heads of Satan to be crushed under our feet quickly (Revelation 16:20), because this enemy plans with his heads toreign over us but we do not accept any king other than our Christ.

2. In the second absolution, the priest views the divine incarnation as the source of our inner peace (Isaiah 26:12) which was destroyed by sin.

3. In the second absolution also, the priest asks for a fear of God that is full of eagerness for Him, such that the fear of God is mixed with love.

4. The priest asks not only for absolution from sins but also that the believers would be worthy of virtues appropriate for those who enjoy the kingdom of God through the pleasure of the Good Father.

5. The third absolution asks on behalf of the clergy and people for forgiveness of their weakness for the sake of His Holy Spirit Whom He granted to the church.

FIFTEEN: THE FINAL BLESSING

The **final blessing** is given from the merciful God Who blesses His children, and cares and elevates them forever, as well as through the intercessions of the heavenly beings and saints, especially the Theotokos, St. Mary. The priest ends it by addressing "*O Christ our God*" and the people reply, "*Amen.*"

SIXTEEN: THE ROYAL ANTHEM

Before the people leave, the priest proclaims the *Royal Anthem*, which resembles a royal military anthem that is offered to the Lord Christ Who in every liturgy declares His kingdom in the hearts of His people.

*O King of Peace grant us Your peace,
establish for us Your peace,
and forgive us our sins
For Yours is the power, the glory, the blessing and majesty
forever. Amen.*

Then the Lord's Prayer is said and the priest dismisses the people by saying "*Leave in peace; the Lord be with you all. Amen,*" and the people repeat "*And with your spirit also.*"



¹ *To Marcel on Ps.*

² *Dialogue 117.*

³ *Apology 1:13.*

⁴ *The Interpret. Dict. of the Bible, article "Music."*

⁵ *Fr. Mankarios Awadalla: Manarat al-Akdas (The Tower of the Sanctuaries), vol. 3, p. 86 (in Arabic).*

⁶ *See Bishop Mettaos: The Spirituality of the Eucharist's rituals in the Coptic Orthodox Church, May 1987 p. 5 (in Arabic).*