

COPTIC ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE

**PRAISE AND THE RAISING OF INCENSE
OR
SHARING IN ANGELIC WORSHIP**

1994

Father Tadros Yacoub Malaty

English Edition

**St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church
1245 4th Street
Santa Monica, California 90401**

**St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church
427 Westside Avenue
Jersey City, New Jersey 07304**

COPTIC ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE

**A CONCISE DISCUSSION
OF
THE DIVINE LITURGY**

PART 3

**PRAISE AND THE RAISING OF INCENSE
OR
SHARING IN ANGELIC WORSHIP**

1994

Father Tadrous Yacoub Malaty

English Edition

**St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church
1245 4th Street
Santa Monica, California 90401**

**St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church
427 Westside Avenue
Jersey City, New Jersey 07304**

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 Divine Blessing, where we find the open arms of the Father for us, his children. We meet the Slaughtered Lamb, in Whom we abide and Who abides in us, giving to us His Body and Blood so that we may bear His holy nature.

The journey begins with what is called "praise" or "the raising of morning or evening incense" (matins or vespers, respectively)... 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 praise and the raising of incense, but wish that God's Holy Spirit may elevate us to the Heavenly Path itself, so that we can understand the experience and taste it!

> > >

PRAISE

PRAISE AND THE EUCHARIST

When we examine praise and raising of the incense - which consist of prayers, thanksgiving, supplications, readings, honoring of the saints, and asking for intercessions on behalf of every deserving 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 path is the Lord Christ, the Beginning and the End; He is **our continual feast** and the secret to our joy and unceasing praise.

Daily praise prepares the soul to receive the King and for our union 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 first, third, or sixth 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).

The Paul and 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 **written 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 said, "The rested soul forgets its pains, and by singing holy words looks with joy to Christ alone¹."

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).

The martyr Euston said, "prayers and thanksgiving can be considered offerings of complete sacrifice which are accepted by God²." He also said, "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 COLLECTIVE WORK FOR THE CHURCH

Praise is the human being's response to the love of God, so our feelings, senses, thoughts, and desires become like strings of a musical instrument 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 one's chambers, even during sleep and work.

It is important to realize that praise is 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 reveal to the faithful their membership in the church, make them aware that they are not only joining in church services but are an inseparable part of it, 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 in vespers before the evening offering (raising) of incense, then the praise of midnight which continues late in the evening, followed by the praise of the matins, the morning offering of incense, 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 "spirit-borne" anchorites 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 faithful 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. evening raising of incense,
3. midnight praise,
4. the praise of matins,
5. morning raising of incense, and finally
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 faithful meet for vespers, they offer praise as follows:

First: The prayers (praise) of the canonical hours - the ninth, eleventh and twelfth hours. If it is a day of fasting, only the eleventh and twelfth hours are said.

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.

Halleluia!

Third: The fourth period consists of three psalms (148, 149, and 150). Some consider that these praises were originally the prayer of "El SAHAR", which was used in vespers just as it was added to the midnight prayer; the prayer of the first hour 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; halleluia...

Praise Him, all His angels; halleluia...

Praise Him, sun and moon; halleluia...

Let them praise the name of the Lord, halleluia...

This is the spirit of the church since its beginning, inviting everyone and everything to praise, even the material creation. This is a written thought for the psalmist declares that the waters praise God (Psalms 93:3, 4;148:4), and the heavens and heavenly bodies 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 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. Halleluia...

Let Israel rejoice their Maker. Halleluia.

Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. Halleluia.

Let them praise His name with chorus. Halleluia.

Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp. Halleluia.

For the Lord takes pleasure in his people. Halleluia.

He will beautify the humble with salvation. Halleluia.

Let the saints be joyful in glory. Halleluia...

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). Halleluia...

Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet. Halleluia.

Praise Him with psaltery (lute) and harp. Halleluia...

Praise Him with timbrel and chorus. Halleluia...

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Halleluia.

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

Fourth: The **psalm 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 faithful 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 Mother of God. It is a divine piece, full of the spirit of the Holy Bible, confirming that the One born from the Virgin is the Word of God.

El shirat: "Peace... " is beatification to the Holy Virgin because:

a. She offers us a living example of God's blessings to human life.

b. She illuminates the living understanding of the church, which accepts the wealth of God's blessings.

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 EVENING OFFERING (RAISING) OF INCENSE

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 offers evening incense. This three part worship provides the soul the ability to worship in a true biblical spirit. **The soul realizes that it must practice unceasing worship every hour of our sojourn in this world, praying in a universal 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** (ninth, eleventh and twelfth), the faithful 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 evening praise, 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... to participate in praising the Creator.

Third: After the preceding the **evening offering (or raising) of incense** 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 offering incense 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 evening as well as the morning offering of incense.

> > >

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 AD). 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 fathers and the apostles.

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 elders 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). God himself confirmed the use of incense with the offerings of the Holy faith 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 collective spirit, for the role of the congregation (people) in the liturgies is vital and essential... for this reason the church does not recognize secretive services 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 "lios" means "the people" and the second "ergon" means "work." Thus the liturgy is collective public worship and not that of a single priest or deacon.

SILENT (INAUDIBLE) PRAYER

Even with the church's emphasis on collective public worship, it does not ignore the role of the individual, 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 offering of incense, 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 evening incense, may its holy blessings be upon us, amen." While offering incense during matins, he repeats, "the blessing of the morning incense, 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, he repeats, "the blessing of our fathers the apostles, 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 OFFERING INCENSE

If we get away from the details and look at the practice of offering incense, from the beginning to the end - whether vespers or matins - 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 offering or raising of incense from the prayers of the bishop, when he is present; it shows us the role of this rite in the life of the faithful:

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 (praising) of the Bible = immersion into God's Word
5. the lesson (sermon) = the continual need for learning
6. the prayer 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 offering incense:

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 knowledge of goodness and the taste of its reward. 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 third hour, "as we stand in Your holy altar, we stand in heaven." **St. John Chrysostom** said, "when you see the altar curtain open, be sure then that heaven has been opened in its heights⁵."

Thus all the faithful 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 hosts** be with us,

For we have no support in our difficulties and troubles other than You.

It is as if each time the believer shares in the raising of incense, 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 forces as a righteous soldier of Jesus Christ. This is why he likes the title "**Lord, the God of hosts**" and asks "**be with us.**"

Second: The bishop or priest prays the **prayer of thanksgiving**... for He 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,

Make mercy for us (*making the sign of the cross towards the east*)

Be merciful to us.

Hear us (*crossing the north*)

Bless us (*crossing the west*)

And preserve us (*crossing the south*)

And protect us (*crossing the east*)

And remove your wrath away from us,

With your salvation care for us, 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 conceal himself 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... he does not read but sings for these are songs of God's love to his church; both the clergy and people experience continual rejoicing in Him.

Fifth: The **lesson**; the church is like a mother in that she offers spiritual nourishment to her children for their spiritual growth. In the lesson, the bishop or priest is addressing himself first before others. As St. Ambrose said, everyone but God 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 **prayer for the congregation** is when 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 raising incense 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 conceal oneself 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 RAISING INCENSE 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 aids found out that he did not dare to enter the altar 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 Righteous 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 said, "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 said, "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 group or individual prayer, we must remember the multitude of God's blessings, so we offer Him 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 power to tread on serpents and scorpions and every 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 its members. He says "**Pray that God has mercy and compassion upon us, ... and accepts the prayers and supplications of His saints for our righteousness 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 accepted the offerings of the righteous Abel, and the sacrifices of Noah and Abraham, and the incense of Aaron and Zecharias."**

Each of these offerings had its own significance:

Abel's offerings: 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.

Zacharias' 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 sweet-scented incense. The lifting up of our hands is an evening offering, for **You, indeed, are the true evening offering Who sacrificed Himself on the honored Cross** for our sins, 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 censing of the altar:

1. The priest alternates in offering incense around the altar first while facing east, and then again when facing west while he is in the embrace of the Father (Who is in the east). 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 censes 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 censing, the priest inaudibly prays three short litanies - for peace, for the fathers, and for the congregation (gatherings), 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 censes three times towards the east while bowing:

- > **We worship You O Christ with Your Righteous Father and the Holy Spirit because You did come and save 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 place, 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 blessings. Because the Mother of God became the exemplary and first member of the holy church, she is entitled to all beatification! 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 next to the icon of the Lord Christ. The priest says, "**Hail to John the son of Zacharias. 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 censing 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: Prayers for the Departed, the Sick and the Travelers

During vespers the priest now prays a **prayer** for the departed, while during matins he prays prayers 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 offering of incense 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 **prayer 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 **prayers 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 morning offering of incense on Sundays (or during feasts or occasions), the **prayer for the oblations** is said instead of the prayer for travelers for it was forbidden to travel on God's day and people used to offer oblations, firstlings and gifts to Christ's church.

In this prayer, the church prays for those who offer gifts gladly, "**those who would offer but have none... grant them the incorruptible in place of the corruptible, the heavenly instead of the earthly, and the eternal instead of the temporal. Fill their homes and stores with all blessings.**" Thus the church prays for every soul who is 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 prayer for the **departed** is said 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 Evening or Morning Incense

The priest now performs what is called the circuit of evening or morning incense:

1. He begins by censuring **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 its 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 censed three times, the hegumenos (protopriest) is censed twice, and the priest is censed 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 **Baptistery**.

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" (review 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**" (review 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 church hall.

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 Orthodox Creed and *Ephnoti Nai Nan*

The people who have been singing doxologies now recite the Orthodox Creed (of Faith), 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 Prayer for the Gospel

The priest says the **prayer of the Bible** as the deacon asks the people "pray for the Holy Bible." This is so that praise introduces a chapter from the Holy Bible, 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 faithful victory in their spiritual battle; he says,

"Bless 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.

Twelfth: The Lesson (Sermon)

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

Thirteen: The Five Short Prayers

The priest prays at the door of the sanctuary the **five short prayers** for 1) peace, 2) the fathers, 3) the place, 4) the winds of heaven (or plants or water), and 5) the gatherings (congregation). Along with the prayers 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 the enemy of good plans with his heads to possess 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, the priest asks for a fear of God that is full of eagerness for him, such that the fear of the divine is mixed with love.

4. The priest asks not only for absolution from sins but also that the faithful 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 Mother of God, St. Mary. The priest ends it by addressing "**O Christ our God**" and the people reply, "**Amen, let it be so.**"

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.**"

> > >

¹To Marcel on Ps.

²Dialogue 117.

³Apology 1:13.

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

⁵Father Makarios Awadalla The light of holy, part 3, page 86.

⁶Review Bishop Mettaos: The spiritual order of the Eucharist in the Coptic Orthodox Church. May 1987 page 5.