



**St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church
Pre-Service Training Seminars**

The Rites of the Coptic Orthodox Church



The Spirituality of the Ritual/Rites

“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33)

THE SPIRITUALITY OF RITUAL

by H.G. Bishop Moussa

The Arabic word for ritual is derived from Greek and means a system or order. The word 'ritual' in the Church means the order of the holy service and its organization, that is, the prayers that are said whether verbally, through worshipful actions, or symbolically.

Included in this ritual is the shape of the church, its administration, the ranks of the priests and their clothes. Every action in the ritual of holy liturgy in our holy church, which has a solid and apostolic faith, has a sublime spiritual meaning that is the ultimate in sublimeness and spirituality even though many do not see this.

The Importance God Gives to Ritual:

Since ritual means the order of the service, this is compatible with the nature of God Who loves order and organization in everything, especially in the worship offered to Him by man: "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor:14: 33). God is organization, beauty, and order. Rituals have been followed from the beginning of time. We read that after the flood water dried, Noah left the ark and built an altar to the Lord; he took of the clean cattle and of every clean bird and offered them as a burnt sacrifices on the altar. And the Lord smelled a pleasing aroma (Gen.8:21).

We also read about the altar in the life of Abraham, the friend of God. He used to build an altar to the Lord, and call on His Name, making sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord in every place he went to (Gen. 12: 7,8; 13: 18). When God commanded him to offer his son as a sacrifice, he went to the appointed place, built an altar, piled the wood on it, and tied his son Isaac and placed him on the wood (Gen. 22: 9) in accordance to the ritual he followed whenever he offered animal sacrifices.

The same is true of Jacob and of Moses, for whom the Lord organized the way to be followed in worship with its rituals and which Moses recorded in the books of Exodus and Leviticus.

The Lord Jesus and Ritual:

The Lord Jesus respected (when He took the form of our humanity and came as a man) the Mosaic ritual greatly in spite of the fact that He gave the law and ordered the rituals. In this, He is like the director of traffic who puts the rules and regulations, issues them and requires people to carry them out, but is the first to comply with and submit to them.

We see the Lord Jesus submitting to the law of circumcision by being circumcised on the eighth day.

He observed the feasts and shared in celebrating them. He also observed the rituals of worship and

meetings; we read of Him that: "Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did." (Jn.2: 13, 23).

The Apostles and Ritual:

The apostles determined the organization of the churches as they saw fit and as it had been entrusted to them by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. St. Paul received the rituals and the doctrine from the Lord Himself, for he says: 'For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you' (1 Cor. 11: 23). He reassures the believers about the rituals and traditions saying; "And the rest, I will set in order when I come." (1Cor.11:34). He advises his disciple, Bishop Timothy, about the necessity of passing on the traditions and rituals: "And the things you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim.2: 2). He also advises his disciple Titus, Bishop of Crete, saying: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Ti. 1:5). He advises the believers in general saying: "Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Cor. 14: 40) "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14: 33), and He is also the God of order, beauty, and organization.

Ritual and the Holy Bible:

The Coptic Church is a Biblical church that lives by the spirit of the Gospel at the highest level. Its ritual prayers are organized through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and its texts are taken from the Bible so that you find that every word is taken from some Biblical text. One glance at the big missal with references is enough to prove this; you see under each prayer a profuse number of Biblical references as evidence of this.

The Coptic Church a Prayerful Church:

The ritual of Holy Mass in our Church is a long, very satisfying and nourishing one. If the ceremonies are done thoroughly and meticulously, they will take six whole hours. For instance, in Sunday mass, the preparation begins on the previous day when the raising of incense is performed with its beautiful ritual and its worshipful chants. It is preceded by the psalms and Saturday praise. In the dawn of the following day, the worshippers begin with all three services of the midnight prayers in the quiet and beauty of dawn; then they begin the midnight praise with its beautiful chords and its approximately fifteen lovely tunes. Then as the sun begins to rise and send its golden rays on the world reminding us of the Sun of Righteousness, our Lord, the new day is greeted with matins, and we pray: "When the light of day came to us O Christ." This is followed by the Doxology of matins in which we greet the Virgin, the angels, the martyrs, and the victorious saints, feeling their presence with us in Church. Next we go in to raise incense with beautiful prayers which we will expound later. All these prayers are to prepare us for Holy Mass and for partaking of the Sacrifice for our salvation.

From the moment the priest enters church, he does not stop praying, even during Holy Communion. The congregation only hears the prayers that are said aloud whereas there are many other silent prayers that the priest says during the tour of incense and during the reading of the epistles and the gospel. The Church tries to occupy all the mind and time of the priest with prayer, so that he is not distracted by other matters. For example, during the tour of incense, there are a number of short utterances that the priest repeats constantly without stopping until he ends the tour and enters the sanctuary.

During the incense of evensong and matins, he repeats: "The blessing of the incense of evensong, its holy blessings be with us, Amen."

During the incense of matins, he repeats: "The blessing of the incense of matins, its holy blessing be with us, Amen."

During the incense of the epistle of St. Paul, he repeats, "The blessing of the incense of the epistle of St. Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, its holy blessing be with us, Amen."

During the incense of the Acts of the Apostles, he repeats: "The blessing of my lords, the apostolic fathers, that is, our father Peter and our teacher Paul and the rest of the disciples, their holy blessing be with us, Amen."

After the priest has finished the beautiful chant, and the congregation begins to say the Kyrie Eleyson, the priest is not silent. At that time, he raises the cross and has the candles lighted while he says St. Gregory's second petition for the healing of the sick and for rest for those in need.

If we contemplate the midnight absolution for priests, we will find that it is inclusive and does not omit any great or small detail.

How great and profound is our Church in its ritual and spirituality; she still preserves these characteristics and therefore grows in beauty and spirituality.

“Wisdom [our Lord Jesus Christ] has built her house [the Church], She has hewn out her seven pillars [the seven Sacraments].” (Prov 9:1)

✠ **Lecture I: What is a Sacrament?** ✠

✠ **Introduction:**

To materialists, this world is opaque like a curtain; nothing can be seen through it. A mountain is just a mountain, a sunset just a sunset; but to poets, artists and saints, the world is transparent like a windowpane – it tells of something beyond. For example, a mountain tells of the power of God, the sunset of His beauty, and the snowflake of His purity. A Sacrament, **in a very broad sense of the term**, combines two elements: one visible, the other invisible – one can be seen, or tasted, or touched, or heard while the other remains unseen to the eyes of the flesh. There is, however, some kind of relation or significance between the two. A spoken word is a kind of sacrament because there is something material or audible about it; there is also something spiritual about it, namely, its meaning. A horse can hear a funny story just as well as a man. It is conceivable that the horse may even hear the words better than the man and at the end of the story the man may laugh, but the horse will never give a horselaugh. The reason is that the horse gets the material side of the ‘sacrament’ namely the sound, but man gets the invisible or the spiritual side, namely, the meaning. A handshake is a kind of sacrament, because there is something seen and felt, namely the clasping of the hands, but there is something mysterious and unseen, namely, the communication of friendship. A kiss is a kind of sacrament, the physical side of it is present if one kisses one’s own hand, but the spiritual side of it is missing because there is no sign of affection for another. No wonder our Lord said to Judas, “are you betraying the son of Man with a kiss?” (**Jn 22:48**)

Take the brazen serpent in the desert. When the Jewish people were bitten by poisonous serpents, God commanded Moses to make a brazen serpent, and to hang it over the crotch of a tree (**Num 21:8-9**); all who would look upon that serpent of brass would be healed of the serpent’s sting. This apparently was a rather ridiculous remedy for poison and not everyone looked at it. If one could discern or guess their reason, it would probably be because they concentrated on only one side of the symbol, namely, the shiny, lifeless brass thing hanging on a pole. But it proved to be a symbol of faith; God used that material thing as a symbol of trust or faith in Him. The symbolism goes still further, the Old Testament is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ who revealed the full **mystery** of the brazen serpent. Our Lord told Nicodemus that the brass serpent was lifted up in the desert so that He would have to be lifted up on the cross (**Jn 3:14**). The meaning now becomes clear; the brass serpent in the desert looked like the serpent that bit the people, but though it seemed to be the same, it was actually without any poison. Our Blessed Lord now says that He is like that brazen serpent. He, too, would be lifted up on the crotch of a tree, a cross. He would look as if He Himself was filled with the poison of sin, for His body would bear the marks, and the stings, and the piercing of sin; and yet as the brass serpent was without poison so He would be without sin. As those who looked upon that brass serpent in the desert in faith were healed of the bite of the serpent, so all who would look upon Him on His cross bearing the sins and poisons of the world would also be healed of the poison of the serpent, Satan.

The word “sacrament” in Greek means “mystery”, and our Lord Jesus Christ has been called by St. Paul **“a great mystery” (1 Tim 3:16)**. In Him is something divine, something human, something eternal, something temporal, something invisible, something visible. The Human Nature of our Blessed Lord had no power to sanctify of and by itself; that is to say, apart from its union with the Divinity, but because of that union, the Humanity of the Lord became the efficient cause of our justification and sanctification and will be until the end of the world. Herein is hidden **a hint** of the Sacraments. The Humanity of the Lord was the bearer of Divine life and the means of making men holy, the Sacraments were also to become the **effective means** of the sanctification purchased by his death. As our Blessed Lord was the sensible sign of God (He is truly God), so the Sacraments were to become the sensible signs of the grace (they are truly grace), which our Lord had won for us.

If men were angels or pure spirits, there would have been no need of our Lord Jesus Christ using human nature or material things for the communication of the divine, but because man is composed of matter and spirit, body and soul, man functions best when he sees the material as the revealer of the spiritual. From the very beginning of man’s life, his mother’s fondling is not merely to leave an impress upon his infant body, but rather

to communicate the sublimely beautiful and **invisible** love of the mother. It is not the material thing that man values, but rather what is signified by it.

✠ Sacraments & Salvation:

One often sees signs painted on roadways, “Jesus saves”. Now this indeed is true, but the important question is how does He save? What relation do we have in the twenty-first century to our Lord Jesus Christ in the first? Do we establish contact with Him only by reading about Him? If that were all, our relationship is not much closer than that which we can have with Plato. If the Lord Jesus Christ is only a memory of someone who lived centuries ago, then it is rather difficult to see that His influence will be any different than that of Socrates or Buddha. The answer to the question of how our Lord Jesus Christ saves is to be found in the Sacraments. The Divine life of the Lord is communicated through His Church or His mystical body in exactly the same way that His divine life was communicated when He walked on earth. As He then used His human nature as the instrument of divinity and used material things as means to confer His grace; clay and water in the case of the born blind (**Jn 9:11**). He now uses other human natures (priests) and material things (water, bread and wine, oil) as instruments for the communication of the same divine life (grace).

Every Sacrament has an outward or visible sign. For example, in Baptism it is water, in the Eucharist it is bread and wine, but the Sacrament also has a form or formula, words of spiritual significance given to the matter when it is conferred. Three things then are absolutely required for a Sacrament: (1) Its institution by the Lord Jesus Christ, (2) an outward sign, and (3) the power of conferring the grace purchased for us by the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord.

Calvary is like a reservoir of divine life or grace. From it, there flows seven different kinds of sanctification for man in different stages in his spiritual existence. Each of these seven channels is a Sacrament by which the power of the Risen Christ is bestowed on souls by a spiritual and effective contact. This divine grace pours into the soul when we receive the Sacraments, unless we put an obstacle in the way, just as water will not flow out of a faucet if we put our hand in front of the faucet. But the faucet in a house has no power to quench thirst unless there is a reservoir and a pipeline. So the Sacraments do not confer grace as magical signs, they communicate it only because they are in contact with the Risen Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit about Whom the Lord said, “He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (**Jn 17:14**).

✠ The Seven Holy Sacraments:

1. The Sacrament of Holy Orders (Priesthood)
2. The Sacrament of Baptism
3. The Sacrament of Confirmation
4. The Sacrament of the Eucharist
5. The Sacrament of Repentance & Confession
6. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick
7. The Sacrament of Matrimony

(Adapted from *‘These are the Sacraments’* by Fulton J. Sheen & Yousuf Karsh.)

Q: The word “mystery” occurred in Holy Scripture with many meanings, how are these meanings different from the “Sacraments” of the Church?

A: The word “mystery” in Holy Scripture has two meanings:

1. Mysteries of knowledge that God reveals (Secrets or Hidden Truths).
2. Mysteries of grace where the Holy Spirit grants invisible gifts (Sacraments).

1. Mysteries of Knowledge:

- “The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him.” (**Ps 25:14**)

- “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.” (**Amos 3:7**)
- “Then the secret was revealed to Daniel.” (**An 2:19**)
- “To you it has been given to know the mysteries (secrets or hidden truths) of the Kingdom of God.” (**Lk 8:10**)
- “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory.” (**1 Cor 2:7**)
- “Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing.” (**1 Cor 13:2**)
- “Having made known to us the mystery of His will.” (**Eph 1:9**)
- “That I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel.” (**Eph 6:19**)
- “The mystery [secret or hidden truth] which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.” (**Col 1:26**)
- “Meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery [hidden truth] of Christ.” (**Col 4:3**)
- “The knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ.” (**Col 2:2**)
- “Great is the mystery [hidden truth] of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.” (**1 Tim 3:16**)

2. Mysteries of Grace:

The word Sacrament is the conjunction of the Latin word *sacer* (holy) with the Greek word *mysterion* (secret rite). Sacrament was thus given a sacred mysterious significance that indicated a spiritual potency. The power was transmitted through material instruments and vehicles viewed as channels of divine grace and as benefits in ritual observance instituted by Christ. St. Augustine defines Sacraments as ‘The visible form of an invisible grace’ (Encyclopedia Britannica; Volume 26, Page 834)

- “A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery [Sacrament] but I speak concerning Christ and the Church” (**Eph 5:31-32**)
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