



St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church Pre-Service Training Seminars

The Rites of the Coptic Orthodox Church



Lecture 3 The Sanctuary of the Church

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

The Rites of the Coptic Church

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Pre-Service Training Seminars



Lecture 3:
THE SANCTUARY OF THE CHURCH

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

St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church ✠ كنيسة الشهيد العظيم مارمينا العجايبى

The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Sanctuary:

- The Sanctuary, as viewed by the Orthodox Church, represents heaven itself or God's residence place among His heavenly creatures and saints.
- The following traditions are observed by the church to indicate its reverence:
 - Laymen are forbidden to take part in the Communion inside the Sanctuary area.
 - We can only step into the Sanctuary bare-footed, in response to the divine commandment to Moses "Take off your shoes... for the place whereon you stand is holy ground". (Ex 3:5). Taking off the shoes indicates the feeling of unworthiness to be present in such a holy place.
 - The church ordains that: "No talking is allowed in the Sanctuary, except for urgent matters".





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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Altar:

- The English word 'Altar' is derived from the Latin word 'Altare', which means the place or the sculpture upon which sacrifices are slain. Other names for the Altar are table (the Table of the Lord) and 'Mazbah' in Arabic.
- The Altar material can be made of wood, stone, or metal.
- The Coptic Altar takes the shape of approximately a cube, which resembles the Tomb of the Lord.
- It must be hollow so that relics of saints can be kept inside or beneath it. Nevertheless, recent trends tend to keep these relics in a container next to the icon of the saint to enable the people to kiss it and receive their blessing.
- In the Coptic Church, the choir is usually raised three steps above the rest of the Nave, while the sanctuary is often raised one step above the choir.

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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Altar:

- The Altar is never raised above the sanctuary, but is fitted directly on its ground, as directed by the divine commandment. (Exod. 20 : 26).
- The Altar is consecrated by a bishop anoints it by Chrism. The Liturgy of the Eucharist can be temporarily held on an un-consecrated Altar as long as a consecrated Altar-Board is placed upon it.
- The Altar must not be left without coverings, which often consist of three layers:
 - I. The first cloth covers the Altar completely from all sides, and is decorated with four crosses (one at each corner) or just a big cross in the centre. The most commonly employed material, in the Coptic rite, is the white linen as an indication of purity, but in recent times red cotton velvet is sometimes used.

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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Altar:

- II. A white linen cover is placed on the above, which hangs only about 15 cm. from the Altar surface.
- III. The third layer is used only during the celebration of the Liturgy of Eucharist to cover the Holy Gifts, and is called 'Prospharine' derived from the Greek word 'prosphora', i.e., 'oblation'. It represents the stone that the angel rolled away from the Tomb of Christ. After the prayer of Reconciliation, the priest and the deacon lift it up from its place and shake it so that the little jingles attached to its edges produce audible sounds. It resembles the earthquake that took place during the resurrection of Christ.

– The Altar has held a distinct sanctity ever since the Early Church. Nothing is placed on it, apart from the Holy Elements, the sacred vessels and the Gospel.

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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Altar:

- As for candlesticks, one is placed on the right side of the Altar, and the other on the opposite side. They refer to the two angels guarding the Lord's Tomb. At present, placing candlesticks on the Altar is not at all uncommon, but the trend is to return to the early practices.
- On the surface of the Coptic Altar, an oblong rectangular slot is engraved to a depth of about 2.5 cm., in which a consecrated Altar-Board is loosely embedded. The Board is generally made of wood, or rarely of marble, upon which the following are painted:
 - A Cross or a number of crosses.
 - The first and last Greek alphabetical, A and W.
 - Occasionally few selected psalms such as (Ps. 86 (87): 1, 2) or (Ps. 83: 3)

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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Ciborium/Canopy:

- The majority of the main Coptic Altars, and sometimes the side ones, are surmounted by a wooden or stone canopy, which rests upon four pillars of stone or marble. It is known as the Ciborium; a term that is probably derived from the Greek word 'Kiborion', which originally meant the hollow seed case of the Egyptian water lily. Later, the term was applied to drinking cups because of the similarity in shape between them, and eventually it was adopted by the church for the above-mentioned canopy which takes the shape of the bowl of a cup.
- More widely, this term is now commonly employed in the liturgical terminology to designate:
 - The structure that is mentioned above.
 - The covering suspended over the bishop's throne.
 - The dome-shaped vessel that is used to contain the holy communion for the sick.

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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Ciborium/Canopy:

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

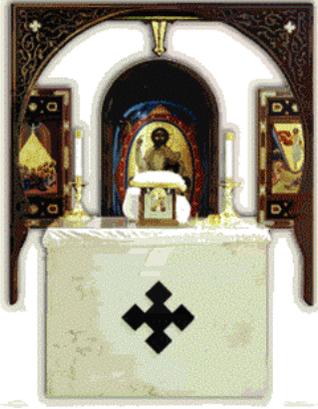
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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Tribune:

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



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The Sanctuary of the Church

❖ The Niche:

- The Niche is the apse that represents the eastern wall of the Sanctuary, which surrounds the tribune.
- It is often occupied with the icon of the Lord Jesus Christ coming on the cloud, carried by the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the four Living creatures, with the twenty four heavenly Presbyters offering incense. The Lord appears holding the planet Earth with one hand, for He is the Almighty one, and the pastoral rod with the other hand, for He is the Shepherd & Redeemer who liberates men from sin's captivity.
- Thus in this sense, the Niche represents the bosom of God, for the Lord longs for His church, and she waits for His coming.
- In front of this icon, a sanctuary lamp that is permanently lit, is fitted. It is known as 'the Perpetual lamp' and represents the star which appeared to the wise men and guided them to where the Lord was born..

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