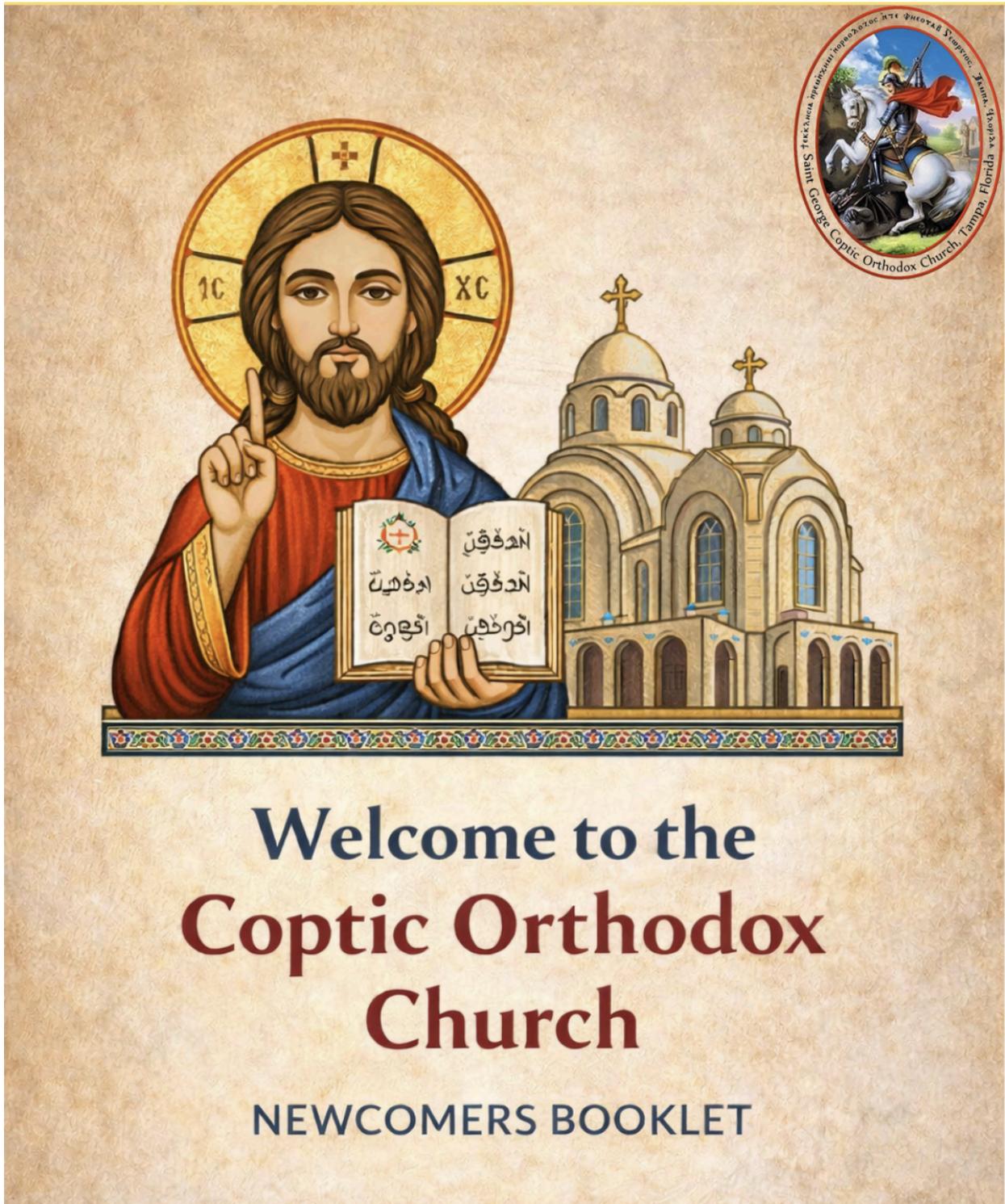


St. George Coptic Orthodox Tampa, FL



Welcome to the Coptic Orthodox Church

NEWCOMERS BOOKLET

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Welcome to the Coptic Orthodox Church

We are truly glad you are here.

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Whether you are visiting for the first time, exploring Christianity, or simply curious, you are welcome.

KEEP IN MIND , YOU ARE STEPPING INTO WHAT IS DESCRIBED IN Acts 2:42 *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

The first Christians lived as a spiritual family. They gathered regularly for teaching, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread.

- There is nothing you need to do to belong in this moment. Simply being here is enough.

“Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.” Matthew 18:20

- You may notice that our worship feels ancient, peaceful, and deeply reverent. That’s intentional. The Coptic Orthodox Church preserves one of the oldest forms of Christian worship in the world.

This guide is here to help you understand what you’re seeing and hearing, so you can feel comfortable and at ease during your visit.

- We are part of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Egypt that was founded in the first century by Saint Mark the Evangelist. Our faith has been practiced continuously for nearly 2,000 years.
- **Whether you are Egyptian or from any other background, all are welcome to come and experience the beauty of the Coptic Orthodox Church..**
- We hope this booklet helps you feel at home and gives you a glimpse into the beauty of Orthodox Christian worship.

What We Believe?

The Coptic Orthodox Church has carefully preserved the Christian faith as it was taught by the Apostles and practiced by the early Church.

We believe:

- Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human.
 - He is eternal with the Father, uncreated, and the Savior of the world.
 - We honor the saints as examples of faithful Christian lives, but we worship God alone.
 - Our statement of faith is the Nicene Creed that was formed in the very first Universal (Ecumenical) Council in Christian history year A.D 325 which has united Christians for centuries.

The Nicene Creed:

“We believe in one God, God the Father the Pantocrator who created heaven and earth, and all things seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy spirit and the Virgin Mary and became Man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. And on the third day He rose from the dead, according to the Scripture, ascended to the heavens; He sits at the right hand of his Father, and He is coming again in His glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

Yes, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-Giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

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And in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the coming age. Amen.”

For information about The Nicene Creed, scan this QR code, or you can find it under “Theology Academy” Youtube page



If you have questions at any point during your visit, please feel free to ask. We are honored that you are here.

For a full video on the history & faith of the Coptic church and the Apostolic Succession use this QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page



The Coptic Orthodox Church: History, Miaphysite Faith, and Preservation of the Apostolic Tradition

1. Apostolic Origins

- **The Coptic Orthodox Church** traces its foundation to **St. Mark the Evangelist**, who preached in **Alexandria in the first century** and established the Church there.
- St. Mark was one of the seventy Apostles mentioned in the Gospel of Luke 10

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- St. Mark was closely connected with the Apostles Peter and Paul during their ministries:

Biblical References

- **Acts 12:12 (NKJV)**
“So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.”
- **Acts 12:25**
“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.”
- **Acts 13:5**
“And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.”
- **Acts 13:13**
“Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.”
- **Colossians 4:10**
“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him).”
- **2 Timothy 4:11**
“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.”
- **1 Peter 5:13**
“She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son.”

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These passages show that **St. Mark worked alongside Barnabas and Paul in missionary preaching and was also closely connected to the Apostle Peter, who refers to him affectionately as “my son.”**

2. The Alexandrian Fathers and Defense of the Faith

- The Church of Alexandria produced great defenders of the apostolic faith throughout history:
 - **St. Athanasius the Apostolic**
 - **St. Cyril of Alexandria**
 - **St. Dioscorus of Alexandria**
- The **Catechetical School of Alexandria** became one of the earliest and most influential centers of Christian theology.

3. The Miaphysite Teaching of Christ

The Coptic Church follows the Christological teaching of **St. Cyril of Alexandria:**

“One united nature of God the Word incarnate”

(μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη)

Meaning:

- Christ is **fully God and fully man**
- The two are **perfectly united in one incarnate nature**
- Without **confusion, change, division, or separation**

4. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD)

The disagreement over Christology at the **Council of Chalcedon** became the **main theological issue separating:**

Oriental Orthodox Churches

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- Coptic Orthodox
- Syriac Orthodox
- Armenian Apostolic
- Ethiopian Orthodox
- Eritrean Orthodox
- Indian Malankara Orthodox

from the **Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.**

The Coptic Orthodox Church and the other Oriental Orthodox Churches maintain the Miaphysite Christology of St. Cyril of Alexandria, who lived and taught before the council of Chalcedon in AD 451, and continues to preserve the ancient apostolic faith, worship, and theology handed down from the apostles, remaining faithful to the unchanged tradition of the early Church

5. Preservation of the Apostolic Faith

Despite centuries of persecution from the Romans, Byzantine Eastern Orthodox, and Arabs , the Coptic Orthodox Church preserved:

- **The apostolic doctrine**
- **The ancient liturgical worship**
- **The sacramental life of the early Church**
- **The monastic tradition founded by St. Anthony the Great**

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For more info on church history and Council of Chalcedon, scan this QR code, or you can find it under “Theology Academy” Youtube page



The Priesthood, Apostolic Succession, and Church Leadership

1. The Priesthood

The priesthood in the Orthodox Church is a sacred ministry established by Jesus Christ. Christ chose the apostles and gave them authority to teach, shepherd the Church, and forgive sins.

John 20:21–23 (NKJV)

“As the Father has sent Me, I also send you... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

Today, priests serve under the bishop, caring for the faithful and celebrating the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments).

2. Apostolic Succession

The Orthodox Church preserves apostolic succession, meaning the authority of the apostles has been passed down through the

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laying on of hands from generation to generation. Bishops today stand in a direct spiritual line from the apostles.

Acts 14:23 (NKJV)

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord.”

2 Timothy 1:6 (NKJV)

“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.”

3. The Role of the Bishop

The bishop is the successor of the apostles and the spiritual leader of a local church (diocese). Priests and deacons serve under his guidance.

The bishop safeguards:

- the apostolic faith
 - the unity of the Church
 - the proper celebration of the sacraments.
-

4. The Holy Synod

The Orthodox Church is governed conciliarly, meaning through a council of bishops called the Holy Synod. The Synod:

- safeguards the teachings of the Church
- provides spiritual leadership

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- maintains unity in faith and practice.

This follows the model of the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:6 (NKJV)

“Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.”

5. The Pope (Coptic Orthodox Understanding)

In the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Pope is the Patriarch of Alexandria and the spiritual father of the Church, known as the “Pope and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark.”

The word “Pope” comes from the Greek *pappas*, meaning father. Historically, the title “Pope” was first used for the Bishop of Alexandria, about two centuries before it was later used for the Bishop of Rome.

The Pope of Alexandria is:

- the successor of St. Mark the Evangelist
- the chief shepherd of the Coptic Orthodox Church
- the president of the Holy Synod.

Unlike the Roman Catholic doctrine, the Coptic Orthodox Church does not teach papal infallibility. The Pope leads the Church together with the bishops in the Holy Synod, and the faith is safeguarded by the whole Church in council.

The Orthodox Church preserves the apostolic structure of the early Church:

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- Christ established the apostles.
- The apostles ordained bishops, priests, and deacons.
- Through apostolic succession and the councils of bishops, the Church continues to guard the apostolic faith today.

For more readings and videos on priesthood, Scan this QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page under “Orthodox and Detox podcast” title “*Orthodox Priesthood Explained*”

Video



Readings



Sacrament of The Holy Eucharist: The True Body and Blood of Christ

In the Coptic Orthodox Church, **Holy Communion is not merely symbolic**. We believe that through the work of the Holy Spirit during the Divine Liturgy, the bread and wine become the **true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

This belief comes directly from the words of Christ Himself:

“For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.” (*John 6:55, NKJV*)

“Take, eat; this is My Body... Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant.”
(*Matthew 26:26–28, NKJV*)

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From the earliest centuries, Christians understood the Eucharist as the **real participation in Christ's Body and Blood** (1 Corinthians 10:16).

For more on The Eucharist, watch 2 videos, scan this QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page

1- The Eucharist - 3 Powerful Blessings from the Bible - Coptic Orthodox View - Fr. Joshua Gerges



2- The Eucharist Explained: Breaking Addiction & Bad Habits—Orthodox & Detox S1 Ep.2



Sacrament of Confession : Preparing to Receive Communion

Confession: Healing , Spiritual Guidance, and Preparation to Receive The Eucharist

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In the Orthodox Church, the **Sacrament of Confession** is not only about forgiveness of sins—it is also a place of **spiritual guidance and healing**.

Christ is the **true forgiver of sins**, but He works through the **apostles and their successors (the priests)** to grant forgiveness and guide believers in repentance.

Scripture encourages believers to confess and seek spiritual healing:

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”*(James 5:16)*

John 20:20–23 “21 So Jesus said to them again, *“Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.* 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*”

23 *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

Through confession:

- We receive **God’s forgiveness**
- We receive **spiritual advice and guidance**
- We grow in self-awareness and repentance
- We learn how to overcome struggles and grow in Christ

The priest serves as a **spiritual father**, offering pastoral care and guidance to help each person grow in their relationship with God.

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For a full video on The Sacrament of Confession, scan this QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page



The Wisdom of the Church Fathers

The Coptic Orthodox Church treasures the teachings of the **early Church Fathers**, who faithfully preserved and explained the Christian faith.

Among them are great saints such as:

- **St. Athanasius the Apostolic**
- **St. Cyril of Alexandria**
- **St. Anthony the Great**
- **St. Basil the Great**
- **St. John Chrysostom**

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Their writings and teachings continue to guide the Church today, helping us understand Scripture and live the Christian life with faithfulness and wisdom.

Sunday Visit Guide

- Appropriate Attire for Sunday Worship

For Sunday Divine Liturgy in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the goal is modesty, respect, and reverence, since we are entering the house of God and participating in worship.

For Men

Suitable options include:

- **Dress shirt or button-down shirt**
- **Polo shirt (simple and modest)**
- **Dress pants or khakis**
- **Clean shoes or dress shoe**

Optional but common:

- **Blazer or suit jacket**
- **Full suit and tie** (mostly during the feasts of Resurrection and Nativity)

Avoid:

- **Shorts**
- **Tank tops**
- **Clothing with distracting graphics or slogans**
-

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For Women

Suitable options include:

- **Modest dresses or skirts**
- **Blouses with sleeves**
- **Dress pants or modest slacks**
- **Closed or modest shoes**
-

Avoid:

- Very short skirts or dresses
- Low-cut or revealing clothing
- Very casual clothing such as beachwear

General Principle

The focus is **reverence, modesty, and simplicity** rather than fashion.

Scripture encourages modesty in worship:

“Let women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation.”

(1 Timothy 2:9, NKJV)

And the same principle applies to everyone: we dress in a way that **honors God and respects the sacredness of the Liturgy.**

A Final Encouragement

If you are visiting for the first time, **do not worry about dressing perfectly.** Your **presence and your prayer** are what matter most.

When Should I Arrive?

The Scripture readings and sermon begin at 9:00 AM.

We encourage everyone to arrive a little early so you can find a seat, settle in, and prepare your heart for worship. If you arrive later, that is perfectly fine — simply join the service quietly and comfortably.

Because the Orthodox Divine Liturgy has several sections, some people may arrive at different times during the service. However, those who plan to receive Holy Communion should arrive before the Scripture reading, unless they have received permission from the priest..

Where Should I Sit?

You are welcome to sit wherever you feel most comfortable.

In our tradition, men and women typically sit on separate sides of the church. This is an ancient Christian practice meant to:

- Reduce distractions
- Encourage prayerful focus
- Preserve reverence during worship
 - It is not about inequality. Men and women are equal before God.
 - Families with children may choose to sit together.
 - Families with young children often sit toward the back, where there is a designated area to help them feel more comfortable during the service.

If you prefer a quieter space, you may wish to sit toward the middle or the front. Do not feel embarrassed to walk to the front to sit, this is very common.

Most importantly, please sit wherever you feel at ease. We are glad you are here.

What Is the Divine Liturgy?

The word Liturgy means “the work of the people.” It is the ancient form of Christian worship that has been preserved in the Orthodox Church for nearly 2,000 years.

The Divine Liturgy is the central worship service of the Orthodox Church. It is not a performance to watch, but a sacred prayer in which the priest, deacons, and congregation pray together. During the Liturgy, we believe heaven and earth meet as we worship God.

What Happens During the Liturgy?

The Divine Liturgy includes:

- Prayers and hymns
- Readings from Holy Scripture
- A sermon
- Liturgical prayers asking God, through the Holy Spirit, to transform the bread and wine into the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ
- Holy Communion (the Eucharist) — receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ

The Liturgy is divided into 3 main sections

1- Offering the Lamb : where the priest chooses the bread and wine to be prayed on and consecrated to be the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ (The EUCHARIST)

2- Liturgy of the Word: Readings from the Scripture

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- Readings from the Letters of Apostle Paul
- Readings from the Catholic Letters (Peter, John, James, Jude)

3- Liturgy of the Faithful : starts with the Nicene Creed and ends with receiving the Eucharist (Holy Communion)

Prior to the liturgy, there several services to prepare us for Sunday liturgy and the Eucharist such as:

Saturday evening:

- Raising of incense in Vespers: 6:00-6:30pm
- Midnight prayers from the book of psalms: 6:30-7:00pm
- Midnight praises: 7:00-8:30pm

Sunday morning

- Before Offering the Lamb, there is Raising of incense in Matins: 8:00-8:30am

All of these prayers and praises are to prepare our hearts and soul to receive the Holy Eucharist

Language of the Service

Our Sunday Divine Liturgy is conducted primarily in English (about 95%) so everyone can follow and participate. A few Coptic hymns are included to preserve the beautiful ancient tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Participating in the Liturgy

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TV screens throughout the church display the prayers and responses so everyone can follow along. The sections are clearly marked for:

- Priest
- Deacon
- People

When the section says “People,” that is the congregation’s response. Visitors are welcome to participate as they feel comfortable.

Over time, the rhythm and beauty of the Divine Liturgy become familiar and deeply meaningful.

Why Do We Chant?

You may notice that most prayers are chanted rather than spoken.

We chant because:

- Early Christians sang their prayers
- Singing helps the heart pray more deeply
- It unites us as one congregation
- Scripture tells us that heaven itself worships in song

Why Are Some Hymns Long?

In the Orthodox Church, long hymns are not about length for its own sake — they are about depth.

They help us slow down and enter into the mystery of God’s presence. Just like the Psalms or the heavenly worship described in the Book of Revelation, our hymns are rich with Scripture and theology.

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They are not rushed because love is not rushed.

When we sing these hymns, we are not performing. We are praying, meditating, and joining the eternal praise of heaven. It is a spiritual journey, not a show.

Even listening is participation in prayer.

– The Lord’s Prayer: (As prayed in the Coptic Orthodox Church)

“Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one.

In Christ Jesus our Lord,

For Thine is the Kingdom,

The power, and the glory,

Forever. Amen.

- We repeat this prayer often throughout our services, joining the prayer Christ Himself taught us in Matthew 6:9, Luke 11:2 .

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- **Psalm Numbers in the Morning during Offering the Lamb**
- At the beginning of the service, during the Psalm prayers, a deacon may walk down the aisle and give each person a Psalm number.
- These Psalms come from the **Book of Hours (Agpeya)**, specifically from the 3rd and 6th Hour prayers.
- If you receive a Psalm number, you may look it up in a Bible app on your phone and pray it silently in your heart.
- This is a beautiful way for everyone to personally participate in worship.
- This practice reflects the early Church's understanding of shared prayer:

1 Corinthians 14:26 “How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

- Even quiet, personal prayer during the service is a meaningful way to join in worship.

For a full layout of the liturgy step by step, visit our website under “New to orthodoxy”, title



For a full video on the history and sections of the liturgy, scan this QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page title “*Coptic Liturgy Explained to Catechumens - Q&A - History and Structure - Fr. Joshua Gerges*”



COPTIC ORTHODOX PRACTICES DURING THE LITURGY

You May Notice These Practices

- Women Wearing a Head Covering

Some women choose to wear a head covering during worship.

This practice is rooted in Scripture:

1 Corinthians 11:13

“Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?”

1 Corinthians 11:5–6

“But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head... For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn...”

In early Christian understanding, the head covering was a sign of reverence and humility before God. It also reflected modesty and honor during prayer.

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Scripture describes a woman's hair as her glory. During worship, our focus is meant to be on the glory of Christ alone. The head covering became a symbol of directing attention toward God rather than ourselves.

This practice is not about inferiority, but about reverence and devotion during prayer.

- **The Holy Kiss (Greeting of Peace)**

Shortly after the sermon, the deacon invites everyone to "Greet one another with a Holy Kiss." This takes place before Holy Here is the updated, clear, and organized version including that detail:
How to Share the Holy Kiss

During the service, when the deacon says, "Greet one another with a Holy Kiss,"

Romans 16:16 "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you."

2 Corinthians 13:12 : "Greet one another with a holy kiss."



you may participate in this way:

1. Stretch out both hands gently in front of you, as if greeting someone — using both hands.
2. The person next to you will do the same.

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3. Place your right hand lightly between the other person's hands for a brief touch.
4. Then gently kiss the tips of your own fingers while saying:

“The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

You repeat this greeting with those next to you on both sides, as well as with those in front of you and behind you, passing the peace throughout the congregation.

This simple gesture expresses peace, reconciliation, and unity before approaching Holy Communion.

If you are visiting and prefer not to participate, you may simply bow your head or say the words quietly. Your comfort is important.

- **THE SIGN OF THE CROSS**

You may notice people making the Sign of the Cross at certain moments during the service.

When Do We Make the Sign of the Cross?

We typically make the Sign of the Cross:

- When the words **“Holy,” “We worship,”** or **“We glorify”** are mentioned
- When the priest blesses the congregation with the cross
- During other sacred moments of prayer

The gesture is made by tracing the cross on the body:

How Do We Make the Sign of the Cross?

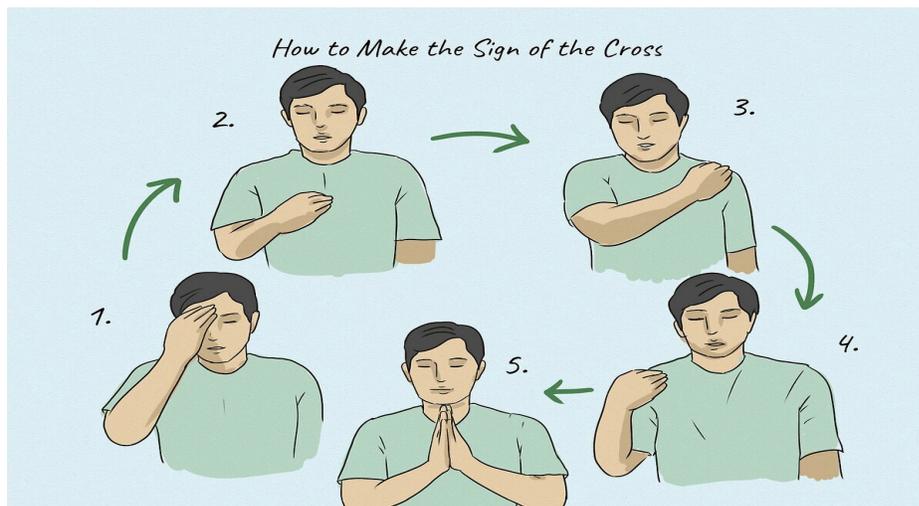
To make the Sign of the Cross, place your **thumb, index, and middle finger together.**

Then move your hand in this order:

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Forehead → Down to the chest → Left shoulder → Right shoulder

This simple gesture is a visible expression of our faith in the Holy Trinity and a reminder of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.



Why Do We Do This?

The Sign of the Cross is a visible expression of our faith in Christ's saving work.

Scripture teaches:

1 Corinthians 1:18

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”
The Cross is not just a symbol — it is the power of Christ for salvation.

When we make the Sign of the Cross, we are:

- Remembering Christ's sacrifice
- Declaring our faith in Him
- Placing ourselves under His blessing and protection

It is a simple but meaningful act of devotion.

- **Giving a Prayer Note**

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During the service, as the priest passes through the church, you are welcome to give him a small note with names or prayer requests.

These notes are brought to the altar and lifted in prayer before God.

We are honored to pray for anything that is on your heart — whether for yourself, your family, or someone in need.

You do not have to be a member to request prayer. We are here to pray with you and for you.

Greeting the Priest

In the Orthodox Church, we greet a priest with respect and reverence for the grace of the priesthood entrusted to him by God.

A common greeting is:

- “Hi Father...”
- “Peace Father...”

A Traditional Gesture of Respect

It is customary to bow slightly and extend your right hand toward the priest. Traditionally, many people kiss the priest’s hand.

This gesture is not reverence for the person himself, but for:

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- The priest's hands touch and distribute the Holy Eucharist — the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- The grace of the priesthood he has received through ordination
- The blessings given through his hands
- The Cross he bears and the Sacraments he administers
- Through these hands, God blesses, absolves, anoints, and offers the Holy Mysteries to His people.

Biblical Foundations for Honoring Spiritual Fathers

Holy Scripture teaches us to honor those who serve in spiritual leadership:

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.”

(1 Timothy 5:17, NKJV)

“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow.”

(Hebrews 13:7, NKJV)

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls.”

(Hebrews 13:17, NKJV)

If the Priest Is Holding the Cross

Sometimes the priest may be holding a large cross for blessing. In this case, the faithful usually kiss the cross. Some may kiss the cross first then the hand of the priest since the cross represents Christ's sacrifice and blessing.

A Note About Humility

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At times, the priest may gently pull his hand back. This is simply an expression of humility and should never cause offense.

The gesture of bowing slightly and extending your hand itself is a sign of reverence and respect, whether or not the priest allows his hand to be kissed.

- **Common Words You May Hear During the Service**

Kyrie eleison – “Lord, have mercy”

Pantocrator – “Almighty”

Agios – “Holy”

These are ancient Greek words that have been preserved in Christian worship since the early Church.

“The prayer ‘Kyrie eleison’ (Lord, have mercy) is sometimes chanted in a fast-paced melody forty-one times during certain parts of the Church’s prayers, such as during

- The Prayer of the Psalms
- Choosing the Lamb.

The forty-one repetitions symbolize the sufferings of Christ:

- The thirty-nine lashes He received during the scourging.
- The crown of thorns placed upon His head.
- The spear that pierced His side on the Cross.”

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These are the sufferings that the church reminds us of while we recite this short but effective prayer of 'Lord have mercy.

“Lord, Have Mercy”

In Orthodox worship, the prayer “Lord, have mercy” is repeated many times. This repetition is a humble cry to God for His compassion, forgiveness, and help. Like the people in the Gospels who called out to Christ for mercy, we also continually turn to Him with faith and trust.

Why Do We Say “Catholic Church”?

In the Creed, we say “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

The word *catholic* comes from Greek and means “universal.”

It does not refer to a specific denomination. It refers to the wholeness and unity of the Church established by Christ and handed down through the Apostles.

It describes the universal Church that preserves the Apostolic faith unchanged.

The Roman Catholic Church later adopted “Catholic” as part of its official name after the Great Schism of 1054.

- Incense in The Worship

Incense is burned during the service as a symbol of our prayers rising to God.

Revelation 8:3–4

“...the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God...”

Watch full video on Incense by scanning this QR code



- The Altar

The altar is the sacred table inside the sanctuary where the bread and wine are placed and consecrated during the Divine Liturgy.

Hebrews 13:10

“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.”

1 Corinthians 9:13

“Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?”

1 Corinthians 10:21 (NKJV)

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.”

The altar is a place where a sacrifice is offered, it represents the holy presence of God and the place where heaven and earth meet in worship.

More about the Altar in the video “The History and Faith of the Coptic Orthodox Church” in the QR code, or you can find it on our Youtube page



- **People Kissing their Own Hands During Thanksgiving**

During the service, whenever the words “Thanksgiving” or “We thank You” are mentioned, you may notice people gently kissing their own hands — first the palm, then the back of the hand.

This gesture expresses gratitude to God for:

- The blessings we receive
- The prayers that are answered
- And even the things we do not receive, trusting in His wisdom

It is a small but meaningful way of showing love, gratitude, and trust in God.

- **When Do We Stand, Sit, or Bow?**

During the service, we use our bodies to participate in prayer. If you are unsure at any time, simply follow those around you.

Standing During the Divine Liturgy

In the Orthodox Church, the faithful often **stand during much of the service**. Standing is an ancient posture of prayer and attentiveness before God.

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When Do We Stand?

We typically stand:

- **When the priest is praying**
- **When the priest walks through the church with the censer (incense)**
- **During chanting and hymns**
- **During important moments of the Liturgy, such as the Gospel reading and the consecration of the Eucharist**

Why Do We Stand?

Standing during worship expresses:

- **Spiritual vigilance**
- **Watchfulness**
- **Readiness for prayer**
- **Active participation in worship with both body and soul**

Throughout Scripture, standing is often the posture of those who pray and worship before God:

“When you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him.”

(Mark 11:25, NKJV)

“And all the people stood when Ezra opened the book.”

(Nehemiah 8:5, NKJV)

“And the Levites stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel with voices loud and high.”

(2 Chronicles 20:19, NKJV)

Standing reminds us that we are **awake, attentive, and ready to meet God in prayer.**

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A Word for Visitors

It is completely understandable that some people may **not be able to stand or bow during the service** because of medical or physical challenges.

Please feel completely at ease. **Your presence and your prayer are what matter most.**

You are always welcome to **sit whenever you need to**. Over time, you will naturally become familiar with the rhythm of the Liturgy and what feels appropriate according to your health and comfort.

The goal of the Liturgy is **not endurance — it is prayer.**

Sit

We sit:

- During the Scripture readings (except for the Gospel, when everyone stands), if the priest is walking down the aisles with the incense during the reading then we stand
- During the sermon

Bow

When Do We Bow?

During the Divine Liturgy, there are moments when the congregation bows in reverence before God.

We bow when the deacon says phrases such as:

- **“Bow your heads before the Lord.”**

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- **“Worship God in fear and trembling.”**
- **“We worship Your holy Body...”**

Sometimes you may notice people bowing slightly **before** these words are said because they are familiar with the flow of the prayers. You may follow them if you wish, or simply wait until the words are said.

How Do We Bow?

Bowing can be done in different ways:

- **A full bow toward the ground**
- **Leaning forward while seated**
- **Leaning forward and placing your head on the chair in front of you**

All of these are acceptable expressions of reverence and prayer.

- A Note from the Early Church

In the early Church, **there were no seats in the house of God.** The faithful stood throughout the entire service and bowed down in worship, often touching their **foreheads to the ground** as a sign of humility before God.

Today, because churches now have seating and space may be limited, many people **remain seated and bow forward**, while others who have more space (such as near the aisles) may make a deeper bow.

Visitors are welcome to **participate as they feel comfortable.**

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For more information about bowing, find the episode “Prostrations” under the Orthodox and Detox podcast on our youtube channel

- THE HOLY COMMUNION (Receiving The Eucharist)

Holy Communion is very sacred in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Only an ordained priest may consecrate and distribute it.

It is offered to baptized Orthodox Christians who are members of the Church and who have prepared spiritually.

Near the end of the service, the priest will distribute Holy Communion.

To receive Holy Communion, a person must:

1. Be baptized into the Coptic Orthodox Church OR any of the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Eritrean Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Church)
2. Be actively participating in the sacrament of confession
3. Abstain from food and water completely from midnight before the service

If you are visiting and not receiving Communion, you are still very welcome to remain prayerfully present during this sacred moment.

Removing Shoes Before Holy Communion

You may notice that many people remove their shoes before approaching the altar to receive the Eucharist (Holy Communion). This is a reminder that we are standing on holy ground.

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This practice is based on Scripture:

Exodus 3:4–6 “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”

Joshua 5:15 “Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.”

In the Bible, removing shoes was a sign of humility, reverence, and surrender before God. Shoes also symbolize the dust and concerns of daily life. Removing them represents leaving behind worldly distractions and approaching God with purity and respect.

Today, this simple act reminds us that we are approaching something sacred.

- **Covering the Mouth and Drinking Water After Communion**

Reverence After Receiving Holy Communion

- People cover their mouth with a white handkerchief (provided by the church) after receiving the Holy Body of Christ.
- They then hand the handkerchief to the deacon standing next to the priest before approaching to receive the Holy Blood.
- Others may prefer to bring their own handkerchief with them, which is also perfectly acceptable.
- Also, people drink a small amount of water after receiving The Blood..

These practices help ensure that the Holy Body and Blood of Christ are consumed completely. They are simple gestures that express reverence, care, and respect for the sacred gift we have received.

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Such small acts reflect the deep devotion and honor with which we approach this holy moment in the Divine Liturgy.

Fasting in the Coptic Orthodox Church

Fasting is an important spiritual practice in the Coptic Orthodox Church. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, believers fasted as a way to grow closer to God.

Fasting is not simply about avoiding certain foods. It is a spiritual discipline that helps us practice:

- Self-control
- Humility
- Prayer
- Repentance

Jesus Himself taught the importance of fasting:

“When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites... but when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting.”

(Matthew 6:16–18, NKJV)

What Does Fasting Mean?

During most fasting periods in the Coptic Orthodox Church, believers follow a **vegan diet**, abstaining from:

- Meat
- Dairy products

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- Eggs

The fast usually begins with a period of **abstaining from food and drink for several hours in the morning**, followed by eating fasting foods later in the day.

Fasting is always accompanied by:

- Prayer
- Repentance
- Reading Scripture
- Acts of charity and mercy

Major Fasting Periods in the Coptic Church

Throughout the year, the Church observes several fasting seasons.

1. The Great Fast (Great Lent)

This fast is observed before the **Feast of the Resurrection**.

We prefer using the term “**Resurrection**” rather than Easter.

- Duration: **55 days**
- Food: **Strictly vegan for the entire period**

The final week of the Great Fast is **Holy Week (Passion Week)**, which commemorates the last week of Christ’s life on earth.

The Feast of the Resurrection does not have a fixed date. In the early Church (Council of Nicaea, AD 325), it was determined that the Resurrection would be celebrated on the **Sunday following**

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the Jewish Passover. Because the Jewish calendar varies each year, the date of the Resurrection also changes each year.

2. The Nativity Fast

This fast prepares us to receive the birth of Christ.

- Duration: **43 days**
 - Feast celebrated: **January 7**
 - **Seafood is allowed** during this fast except Wednesdays and Fridays.
-

3. The Fast of the Apostles

This fast begins at different times each year, depending on the date of the **Feast of the Resurrection.**

- It always **ends on July 12**
- **Seafood is allowed** except Wednesdays and Fridays

This fast commemorates the fasting of the Apostles before beginning their missionary work.

4. The Fast of the Virgin Mary

This fast was practiced by the Apostles themselves as they prayed for God to reveal to them what had happened to the body of the Virgin Mary

- Begins: **August 7**

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- Ends: **August 22**

If August 22 falls on a Wednesday or Friday, the fast is broken on **August 23**.

- **Seafood is allowed** except Wednesdays and Fridays
-

5. Weekly Wednesday and Friday Fasts

Christians fast **every Wednesday and Friday**, following the command of the Apostles as recorded in the **Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)**.

- Food: **Strictly vegan**

These fasts remind us of:

- **Wednesday** — the betrayal of Christ
- **Friday** — the crucifixion of Christ

Exceptions:

- The **Holy Fifty Days** after the Resurrection (a period of celebration with no fasting)
 - If the **Feast of the Nativity or Theophany** falls on Wednesday or Friday.
-

6. Jonah's Fast

- Duration: **3 days**
- Occurs **two weeks before the Great Fast**

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This fast commemorates the repentance of the people of Nineveh in the Book of Jonah.

7. Paramoun Fast (Preparation Fast)

This is a preparation fast before the feasts of:

- **Nativity**
- **Theophany**

The number of days depends on which day the feast falls.

- **Food: Strictly vegan**
-

8. Personal Fasts

Sometimes individuals fast for personal spiritual reasons or guidance regarding important decisions.

The number of days is determined **in consultation with the priest or spiritual father.**

The Spiritual Purpose of Fasting

Fasting helps us:

- **Discipline the body**
- **Strengthen the soul**
- **Focus on prayer**
- **Depend more fully on God**

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Christ taught:

“This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”
(Matthew 17:21, NKJV)

For newcomers, fasting is learned gradually under the guidance of a **priest or spiritual father**. The goal is not hardship, but **spiritual growth and closeness with God**.

Two simple ways to understand fasting:

- “Fasting is the training ground of the soul.”
- “We fast not because food is bad, but because our love for God must come first.”

Feasts in the Coptic Orthodox Church

The Coptic Church celebrates **14 Lordly Feasts**:

- **7 Major Feasts**
- **7 Minor Feasts**

The Seven Major Lordly Feasts

These feasts celebrate the most important events in the life of Christ.

1. Feast of the Resurrection

The greatest and most honored feast in the Orthodox Church.

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2. Feast of the Nativity (Christmas)

The Birth of Lord Jesus : January 7

3. Feast of Theophany (Epiphany)

The Baptism of Christ — January 19

4. The Annunciation

April 7 — The Archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to Christ.

5. Palm Sunday

Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

It occurs on the seventh Sunday of the Great Fast. It is a feast but the church still observing the Great Fast with vegan diet

6. Ascension

Christ's ascension into heaven — 40 days after the Resurrection.

7. Pentecost

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles — 50 days after the Resurrection.

The Seven Minor Lordly Feasts

These feasts also commemorate important events in the life of Christ.

- **Circumcision of Christ — January 14**
- **Entry of Christ into the Temple — February 15**
- **Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt — June 1**
- **Wedding of Cana of Galilee — January 21**
- **Transfiguration — August 19**

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- Covenant Thursday (Holy Thursday) — the institution of the Eucharist during Holy Week. It is a feast but the church still observing the Great Fast with vegan diet
 - Thomas Sunday — the Sunday after the Resurrection
-

Important Church Commemorations

Feast of Nayrouz (Coptic New Year)

- Celebrated **September 11 or 12**
- Marks the beginning of the **Coptic calendar**
- Honors the martyrs of the early Church

Feast of the Cross

Celebrated **twice each year**, commemorating the discovery of the Holy Cross.

Bringing the Faith into Our Homes

Orthodox Christianity is not only lived in church—it is also lived in our homes and daily lives.

Many Orthodox families set aside a **small prayer corner** that includes:

- Icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints
- A Bible

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- A candle or lamp

This prayer space reminds us to keep Christ at the center of our lives and creates a place of peace, prayer, and reflection in the home.

Just as we see sacred images in the church, our homes can also reflect the beauty of the **Kingdom of God**.

Want to Join or Learn More About the Coptic Orthodox Faith?

We would love to walk this journey with you.

Saturday Classes

You are invited to attend our catechism classes every Saturday at 4:30 PM.

These classes will help you:

- Learn more about Christianity
- Understand the Orthodox Church
- Prepare for membership
- Learn about participating in Holy Communion

Class Topics Include:

- Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church
- Salvation from a Biblical perspective and the necessity of faith in Christ
- The meaning of the Sacraments

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- The Sacrament of Baptism
- The Sacrament of Holy Unction
- The beauty and uniqueness of Orthodox worship
- The use of incense in worship
- Icons and church art
- Understanding the Divine Liturgy
- The Sacrament of the Eucharist
- The Sacrament of Repentance and Confession
- The Sacrament of Priesthood
- The Nicene Creed
- The Council of Chalcedon
- Fasts and feasts
- The importance of reading the Early Church Fathers
- The intercession of the saints
- The validity of the New Testament
- The deity of Christ
- The Holy Trinity
- The perpetual virginity of St. Mary
- Faith and works
- Holy Tradition
- Differences between Catholic and Orthodox
- The infallibility of the Bible, the Sabbath, and praying for the departed
- A final questionnaire

We look forward to answering your questions and growing together in faith.

If you would like, I can next organize the Baptism Requirements section in the same warm, structured style.

Baptism Requirements

If you are preparing for Baptism into the Coptic Orthodox Church, the following steps are required:

1. Complete the Catechism Course

You must successfully finish the full catechism program.

2. Weekly Readings

You will receive weekly readings through WhatsApp, including:

- Bible readings
- Class readings

These readings help reinforce what is discussed during the Saturday classes.

3. Regular Sunday Liturgy Attendance

During the course, regular attendance at the Sunday Divine Liturgy is required.

- Please follow the worship layout pamphlet.
- We encourage sitting toward the front to help focus and fully engage in the service.

4. Complete the Final Questionnaire

You will answer open-book questions covering all topics discussed in class.

This ensures a clear and complete understanding of the Coptic Orthodox faith.

Once you finish the questions, you can let the priest know to sit with you and go over your answers.

5- Confession before Baptism

Once all steps above are completed then you will have a confession with the priest right before baptism and the priest will explain how and what to say in confession.

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For a full video on confession, scan this QR Code, or you can find it on our Youtube page



Additional Meetings

(Highly Recommended but Optional)

To grow spiritually and build community, we encourage participation in the following:

- **Sunday** – Fellowship Meeting
11:00 AM
- **Monday** – Homeless/Assisted Living Outreach
7:00 PM at the Church Hall
Includes a small meal, spiritual talk, and activity.
More details can be found on the church website under
“Community Service.”
- **Wednesday** – Book Club to read the treasures of the early church writings : 7:30 PM. at St. Stephen House (use the side door)
- **Friday** – In-Person Bible Study / Spiritual Meeting
8:30 PM at St. Stephen House (use the side door)
- **For moms:** St. Mary and St Elizabeth moms group. The first Friday of the month at 6:30pm
- **For Men,** Men’s Tuesday activities that include sports and short Bible study followed by a meal. From 6:30-8:00pm

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- **For couples:** St.George Mr.&Mrs monthly Meeting on zoom, the 3rd Wednesday of the month at 8:00pm.
(Feel free to ask the priest to add you to the announcement groups for any of these meetings)

Online Resources

You can also grow spiritually through our church YouTube page:
[St. George Coptic Orthodox Church Tampa](#)



Podcasts

- *Orthodox and Detox:* The Orthodox Faith explained and its power in healing and helping people to break out of bad habits and addictions:
- *The Covenant Table:* on the Orthodox Marriage.

Additional online Content on church youtube page :

- Bible Studies
- Spiritual Sermons

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- Orthodox Faith Explained

Coptic App – “CopticReader”

We recommend downloading the **CopticReader** app, which contains the Church’s prayers, readings, and liturgical texts.

How to Set Up the App

1. Open the app and swipe to the right.
2. Tap “**Settings**” on the left side.
3. Under **Displayed Languages**, uncheck:
 - Arabic
 - Coptic
 - Coptic prayersLeave only **English** selected.
4. Adjust the **Font Size** to what is most comfortable for you.

What You Will Find on the Homepage of the app?

Agpeya – The Book of Hours for daily personal prayers

Bible – The Orthodox Bible (which includes seven additional books in the Old Testament that were removed during the Protestant Reformation)

Liturgy – The Sunday Divine Liturgy texts

Psalmody – Night praises chanted every day of the week

Special – Prayers for other sacraments and special occasions

As you leave today, feel free to take additional brochures about:

- The Eucharist
- Confession
- Priesthood
- Baptism
- The Saints

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- Icons
- Fasting
- Liturgy worship layout
- The differences between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics

We would be honored to walk this journey of faith with you.

Marriage in the Coptic Orthodox Church

If you are planning to join the Coptic Orthodox Church with your current spouse, if you are not yet married but intend to join with your fiancé(e) or partner, or if you are joining in order to marry a Coptic Orthodox Christian , please note the following:

- In the Coptic Orthodox Church, marriage is a Holy Sacrament. It is a sacred union that takes place through the prayers of the priest and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- Even if you are already legally married outside the Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church requires the Sacrament of Marriage to be performed within the Church.

Steps Required for Marriage in the Coptic Orthodox Church

1. Apply for the Pre-Marital Course

Both individuals must complete the Church's pre-marital preparation program.

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2. Baptism is Required Before the Wedding Ceremony

You must be baptized into the Coptic Orthodox Church before the Church wedding ceremony can take place.

However, you may apply for and attend the pre-marital course while preparing for baptism.

3. Contact the Priest

Speak with the priest to begin the required paperwork and to receive guidance regarding engagement prayers and the next steps.

4. Weddings Times: weddings are not allowed during fasting days because fasting seasons in the Church are times of repentance, prayer, and spiritual focus, whereas weddings are joyful celebrations. The spirit of fasting does not align with the festive nature of a wedding.

We are honored to walk with you on this journey toward Baptism and deeper faith.

For more information on Coptic marriages, scan this QR code for the podcast “The Covenant Table” or you can find it on our Youtube page



[Recommended Readings, free downloads online](#)

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1- Comparative Theology
Concept
(Baptism, saints, Tradition..)



2- Salvation in the Orthodox



3- Orthodox Bible commentary, verse by verse



4- Orthodox Literature
Liturgy?



5- How to Benefit from the Holy



6- Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church



7- St. Mary in the Orthodox concept

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Contact our priests

Fr. Moussa Saleh

(813) 857-5725

Fr. Joshua Gerges

(615) 403-7141

Church website

[St. George Coptic Orthodox Church - Tampa](#)



Church social media

***Stay Connected with Our Church Community Online*!**

We are blessed to share in fellowship and worship together. By connecting online, you'll have access to:

- **Inspirational messages and scripture reflections.**

To follow us, simply search for:

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on the following platforms

- **Youtube**
- **Facebook**
- **Instagram**
- **Tiktok**
- **Spotify**
- **Apple Podcasts**