



The Coptic Orthodox Church

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Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church forms the largest religious minority in the Middle East and has one of the oldest histories among the various sects of Christianity. It has existed in isolation for most of its history under Muslim rule, maintaining its doctrinal beliefs while seeking equality in Muslim-dominated Egyptian society.

Church History



- **Copts proud of Golden Age during first 400 years**
 - Founded by the apostle Mark between 40-61 CE
 - First Christian catechetical school founded in Alexandria
 - Alexandrian bishops played key roles in formulating Nicene creed
 - Monasticism developed in Egypt
 - Major See alongside Rome, Constantinople, Antioch & Jerusalem
- **Broke away from universal church in 451**
 - Refused to accept Christology affirmed at Council of Chalcedon, namely that Jesus was one person in two complete natures, one human and one divine
 - Copts believe Christ has one unified nature of human and divine – labeled as heretical Monophysites at Chalcedon, but to this day the Coptic Church refutes this label
 - Coptic, Syrian, Armenian and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches called non-Chalcedonian b/c refuse to acknowledge legitimacy of Chalcedonian council
- **Part of Roman/Byzantine Empire until Arab invasion in 642**
 - Under Muslim rule up to today

Organization

- Belongs to Oriental Orthodox Church along with Syrian, Armenian, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches (all non-Chalcedonian)
- Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria
 - Highest church authority
 - Chaired by Patriarch
 - Responsible for all decisions concerning church's organization and faith
- Alexandrian Patriarchate
 - St. Mark considered first patriarch
 - Current Pope Tawadros II is 118th in “unbroken line of succession”
 - Must be a monk
 - Chairs the Holy Synod



Pope Tawadros II

- Complex system of bishops
 - Metropolitan archbishops/bishops, diocesan bishops
 - Bishops must be monks
- Priesthood
 - Can be married (but must be married before ordination)
- Immigrant Churches
 - Can be found in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North & South America
 - Have not separated from Mother Church – retain subordination to Alexandrian Patriarchate



Knowledge of God

- The Bible (as the main reference)
- Teachings of the Apostles
- Canons of the Canonical councils
- All other verbal Apostolic teachings that exist in the church and in the sayings and writings of the early church fathers



Experiencing God

- Through Faith
 - Christ's blood pays for human sin
 - Salvation is a process that begins with repentance and baptism, not a one-time event
 - Belief that one *has been* saved at baptism, *is being saved* through a life of the sacraments, and *will be saved* by God's mercy on the Last Day
- Through the Seven Sacraments
 - Eucharist, baptism, confirmation, confession/absolution, anointment of sick, matrimony, consecration of priests
 - Baptism
 - Salvation begins
 - Confirmation
 - Receive gift of Holy Spirit, which aids in spiritual growth
 - Confession/absolution
 - Salvation continues through regular repentance and confession of sins, which are absolved by a priest
 - Eucharist
 - Salvation obtained during Eucharist
 - Stand for entire three-hour service to partake in Christ's suffering
 - God's presence in the sanctuary during
 - Transubstantiation of bread and wine

Experiencing God Continued

- Good Works
 - Fruit and witness of faith
- Fasting
 - Fast more than 200 days per year
 - Lay people may/may not fast this strictly
 - Seen as a sacrifice for Jesus
 - Used to invoke God's help in times of distress
- Monasticism
 - Spiritual guide
 - Guides monk in spiritual life: prayer, study, work
 - Abott/abbess responsible for monk/nun's salvation
 - Represents God's will: Guide's word must not be questioned
 - Reading Scriptures crucial: Will of God determined through this
 - Reading writings of early desert fathers & following their example
 - St. Antony: "The Kingdom of God is within you," i.e., is discovered within each individual's heart
 - Follow fasts strictly
 - Fast every day until noon
 - Fast until at least 3 p.m. on official fast days



Saint Bishoy Monastery in Wadi el-Natroun, Egypt