



# Eastern Catholic Churches

## The Coptic Catholic Church of Alexandria

### Coptic

The Coptic Church of Alexandria, Liturgical Family: *Alexandrian*

## 1. Cultural Background of Adherents

### Countries of origin and history of migration to Australia

Coptic means Egyptian. The Coptic Church was founded by St Mark in Alexandria in 62 AD. There are approximately two hundred thousand Catholic Copts in Egypt and approximately ten thousand living in other countries. The migration of Coptic Catholics from Egypt to Australia began in the late 1960s and is still continuing.

### The language used in the Liturgy

The liturgical language of the Coptic Church is Coptic. However, Coptic is only used in part of the liturgy. The other languages used are Arabic (incorporated in the 12th century as a result of Islamic influence) and Greek (incorporated in the 11th century as a result of the influence of the Church of Antioch). Most families use Arabic at home. Divine Liturgies in Melbourne also use a phonetic translation of Coptic into English script/sounds to help children to participate. Children are encouraged to read at the Divine Liturgy and this is undertaken in English.

## 2. Liturgical Seasons

### The Season of Christmas

Traditionally, this season began on November 25 with a period of fasting and abstinence from all foods obtained from animals. However, the Coptic Catholic Synod of Bishops along with the Patriarch determined a shorter period of time. Today, the fast begins around December 10 for a period of fifteen days. Special texts from the Bible are read by families during this time.

**Advent** is celebrated as a season of preparation for Christmas. Christmas is celebrated on two days in Egypt according to the calendar followed. Catholics in the largest cities of Cairo and Alexandria celebrate on December 25, according to the Gregorian calendar. Catholics living in Upper Egypt



celebrate Christmas on January 7, with the Orthodox Church, according to the Julian calendar.

The traditional Christmas Divine Liturgy is celebrated on Christmas Eve. Strict fasting occurs on this day until the Divine Liturgy. The day is known as *'Baramoni el Mellad'*. A nativity scene is set up in the church for this celebration. After the Divine Liturgy the people gather to celebrate and to break the fast. There is no Divine Liturgy on Christmas Day itself.

**The Baptism of Jesus** is celebrated on January 6 (if Christmas is celebrated on December 25). The prayers of the baptismal rite, which is a long, separate rite, are said before the Divine Liturgy. People bring bottles of water to the Divine Liturgy and place them under the altar. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, the people take the water home. Before leaving the church, the priest signs each person on the forehead with water. The families then use the water to bless their homes. During this season, the priest also visits the homes and blesses them with water.

## The Season of the Great Fast

The Great Fasting starts on 1 March. Within the Coptic tradition there is no Ash Wednesday or Ash Monday. Special prayers and readings are included each Sunday during this time. The focus during Lent is on forgiveness and salvation. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are special fast days. The other days of the week are no longer fast days. Fasting is optional for children but most would observe the family custom.

*To be a Coptic Catholic is very important. We go to Church in Flemington with our community. We know everyone there. Our family is very strict in following our religion. We have faith in God. (Anthony)*

## The Great Week

The Great Fast culminates in Holy Week. Holy Week begins on Hosanna Sunday (Palm Sunday) and concludes on Easter Sunday. The Sunday before Hosanna Sunday is known as Baptism Sunday. Families traditionally present children for Baptism on this day.

The ceremonies on this day include a procession around the inside of the church, with the people carrying palm branches and candles. After the first reading, water is blessed which is then used to bless the palms. The palms are taken home. One of the four accounts of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is read in each of the corners of the church. The children process from one corner to the next after each reading. During the readings, children carry palm branches and candles and stand in front of the reader. The priest gives a homily on the significance of the day. There are no Divine Liturgies from Hosanna Sunday until Holy Thursday.

Divine Liturgy on Holy Thursday is held during the afternoon. The ceremony of the washing of the feet takes place before the Divine Liturgy. The feet of twelve boys are washed by the priest. During this ceremony an altar boy reads the account of Jesus washing the feet of his apostles.

During the ceremony on Great Friday, the priest carries a picture of the crucifixion of Jesus around the inside of the church three times. After the third time the picture is placed on the altar and covered with a cloth. This action represents the burial of Christ. The picture remains covered on the altar until Easter



Saturday night. People bring flowers, candles and incense to place in front of the altar on Friday evening. They also bring a small bottle of oil. The priest reads the last section of the Book of Revelation, after which the people place the bottles of oil on the altar around the cross and candles. A Divine Liturgy is celebrated in a shorter form after midnight and the people then begin a special fast until the Saturday night.

The main ceremonies of Easter are held on Easter Saturday evening around eight o'clock. After the first reading, the lights in the church are turned out (except for the candles on the altar). The priest prays a special prayer and an altar boy responds from the sacristy in question and answer format. The lights are turned on again and the people sing a special hymn of the Resurrection. During this hymn the altar boys carry candles, a picture of the Resurrection and the Cross, and a procession moves three times around the inside of the church. Then the Divine Liturgy continues as usual. After the Divine Liturgy, the people return home.

There are no fast days between Easter and Pentecost. The Divine Liturgy of **the Ascension** is celebrated forty days after Easter on Ascension Thursday. Ten days later the Divine Liturgy of Pentecost is celebrated. This marks the end of the season of Easter.

## Pentecost, the Assumption and New Year

The next season starts after Pentecost and finishes on 29 June. During this time the people fast for fifteen days. From July 30 to August 15 the season of the Assumption is celebrated. During this season, special readings from the bible are undertaken by the people as a community. They also pray the rosary.

The new Coptic liturgical year begins on 29 September. The day is celebrated with special prayers and blessings.

## 3. Significant Feast Days and Holy Days of Obligation

The following are some of the significant days for Coptic Catholics:

### **The Assumption (15 August)**

The community celebrates the feast of the Assumption with the Rosary and processions. Children carry pictures and process three times around the church and then around the altar. Special prayers are said and songs are sung in both Coptic and Arabic. This concludes this season.

### **Ss Peter and Paul (12 July)**

### **St Mark (8 May)**

On this day the Church commemorates the death of St Mark. A Divine Liturgy is held in his memory.

## 4. The Reception of Sacraments

All sacraments have two aspects which are celebrated – the symbolic (actions, rituals, ceremonies,



artefacts) and the spiritual dimensions. Through Baptism, the child has the right to receive and participate fully in all other sacraments and in the full life of the Church.

## Baptism

This is a very long rite. After prayers and blessing of the oil of catechumens, the priest anoints the forehead, breast, hands and back of the child. Then there is an exorcism, renunciation and profession of faith by the godparents. The water is blessed at great length. Three lessons and a Gospel passage are read and prayers for the sick, dead, family and friends are included. A little oil of catechumens is poured into the water three times and it is breathed upon cross-wise each time. Then the two godparents bring the child 'from the west to the east over the Jordan' (the font), and the priest immerses the child in the water three times saying, 'N — — , I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'

After the ceremony, advice is given to the godparents and grandparents to care for and watch over the child. The priest then places a white stole on the child, tying it from the right shoulder to the waist, and processes with the child three times around the church and three times around the altar. Children follow with two candles and the cross. This expresses the rejoicing of the Church that this child has joined the Church.

## Confirmation

Confirmation follows Baptism immediately. It is a separate ceremony. The child is anointed with chrism on the forehead, mouth and heart in such a way as to make thirty-six anointings, with varying prayers. This symbolises that the child is being protected from evil.

## Penance

Around the age of 12 the child receives the sacrament of Penance. Before this time, preparation is undertaken for approximately six months. Each Sunday the child goes to Sunday school for instruction.

Absolution is given in a long prayer. The first part of this prayer asks Christ's forgiveness. The second part is an invocation of forgiveness from the Blessed Trinity, through the Church. The penitent says, 'I have sinned; absolve me', to which the priest replies, 'Be absolved by the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and through the mouth of my weak self'.

The administration of this sacrament is less formal than in the Latin Rite. There are no set times, and people can request the sacrament before the Divine Liturgy on Sunday or at any time during the year. The ceremony takes place in a confessional room.

## Eucharist

Communion is received under both species. The words of ministrations are, 'This is in truth the Body and Blood of Emmanuel our God'. The receiver answers, 'Amen'. The Eucharist is given to children at Baptism. One family elects to prepare the bread for the Eucharist for each Sunday. Five or seven loaves



are prepared and baked at home on the day of the Divine Liturgy. Special prayers are said. The loaves are round in shape and about the size of a saucer. Each one is stamped with a Coptic Cross. The priest selects one loaf for the Eucharist which is blessed and broken during Divine Liturgy. Communicants stand in a line in front of the altar. The bread is dipped into the chalice and placed directly into the communicant's mouth. At Baptism, the child receives the Blood of Christ from the priest's index finger which is dipped into the chalice. They receive the Body of Christ for the first time at around 10 years-of-age when they make their First Solemn Communion. Communion is not given in the hand. Communicants pass a plate to one another which is held under the chin to receive Communion.

Altar boys, carrying lighted candles, stand each side of the priest as he administers Communion. Following Communion the altar boys cut up the other loaves. Pieces are given out to the congregation and these are consumed before they leave the church.

## Marriage

Marriage has two parts: the betrothal and the crowning.

In the betrothal ceremony the priest anoints both parties on the head and the wrists. The rite is conducted by exhortations and broken up by antiphons sung by the choir. The betrothal has special prayers which are said. The priest asks the young man if he would accept the young lady to be his fiancé. On acceptance, the priest asks the young lady the same question. (This procedure is regarded as an announcement to the people present and the Church that the couple is engaged.) After this there is a reception where the families celebrate the engagement.

The marriage ceremony has special prayers which are different from the engagement prayers. During the ceremony the priest anoints with oil the forehead, wrists and front of the neck of the bride and the bridegroom. After this, there is a small homily and wedding vows are exchanged by the bride and groom. Then the rings are changed from the right hands, on which they were placed at the engagement, to the left hands. This signifies that the rings are now closer to the heart.

## Holy Orders

The orders are: reader, sub-deacon, deacon, priest, bishop, Patriarch and Pope. Readers, sub-deacons and deacons all provide altar service throughout the Divine Liturgy. They undertake the readings and carry candles during the reading of the Bible and during Communion. They carry candles, crosses and pictures during processions. Readers, sub-deacons and deacons are not permitted to distribute communion.

## Anointing of the Sick

The priest puts oil in a plate with three or seven candles. A prayer is said over each candle. Once the prayers are concluded, the priest uses the oil to anoint the sick person on the forehead, wrists and front of the neck. The remainder of the oil remains in the house to be used in future events. The priest also prays over water, and blesses the house with the holy water. Finally, the priest offers the sick person communion.



Schools, parishes or other organisations are free to use this material, but please note its source as *Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS)*.

