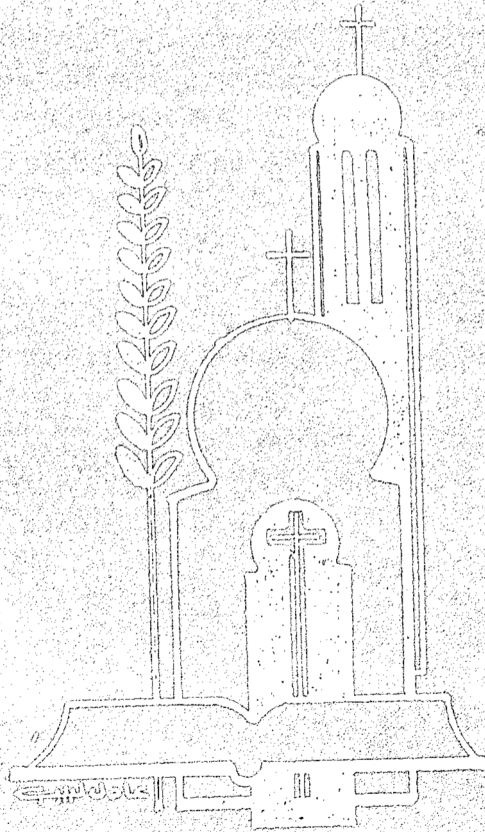


THE DOCTRINES OF THE  
COPTIC ORTHODOX  
CHURCH OF ALEXANDRIA



by

BISHOP ATHANASIUS

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## FOREWORD

The following article is addressed to the congregations and friends of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, who use English as their language of communication.

It is also an enterprise to introduce the doctrines of this Church, which is the first Church in Africa, to a reader who does not expect an elaborate academic thesis. It is an attempt to expose its theology in language understandable to non-theologians, and in short form.

Although it is a private work, with nothing official on part of the Church, yet it claims to be representative and truthful.

Special acknowledgement is made to H.G Bishop Samuel, Bishop of Ecumenical and Social Services, Mrs. and Dr. George Behawi for their revision of the text.

Bishop Athanasios

April 1977

## Chapter I.

### THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE

#### a — IN DOCTRINES :

The Coptic Church claims that its doctrines are obtained from the Scriptures. It is well recognized that all Churches have the same claim to the very same Scriptures. But it could be said that the doctrines of this Church have been the same with no addition, or alteration from the teachings of early Christianity.



On one hand, its theology is based on nothing outside the Scripture. On the other, the doctrines agree in all parts with those of the early Church i.e. the tradition which was the proper interpretation and application of the teachings of our Lord and the Apostles as understood and practised by the Christians and leaders of the Church during the period of the One Universal Church until the division of 451 A.D.

It is a doctrinal principle of the Coptic Church that there must

be no contradiction between Bible and tradition.

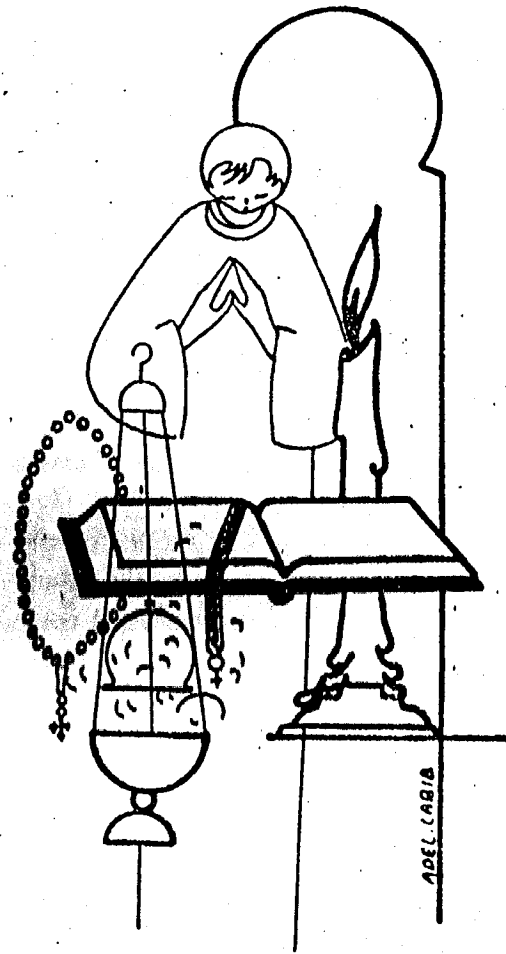
#### b — IN LITURGIES :

The main daily prayers are the daily Office "The Hours", which is a collection of seven groups of prayers to be prayed at seven appointed times in day and night. They consist mainly of psalms, passages of the Gospels and various prayers.

The Eucharistic Liturgy is preceded with songs of remembrance of some great Biblical events of deliverance, and concerned passages of praise such as the crossing of the Red Sea and the rescue of the Three Children. These are quoted directly from the Bible and sung in poetic form as a preparation for the Holy celebration of the Divine Eucharist.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist retains the division made by the ancient Church into the Liturgy of the Word of God and the Liturgy of the Sacrament, (or the Liturgies of the Catechumens and the Faithful). In the first part, the whole service is concentrated on the word of God with several readings from The Psalms, Gospels, Pauline Epistles, Catholic Epistles, and Acts of the Apostles as well as other Old Testament readings during Lent.

The liturgical prayers for the great feasts of the Coptic Church such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the Transfiguration, as well as the other occasions such as Lent, Holy Week, the dedication of new Churches and ordinations, all centre round the word of God, both Old and New Testaments.



The individuals have ever been provoked to be nourished on the study of the Bible. They recited psalms and passages of the Gospel in their seven daily prayers and many learned-by-heart long portions of the various books.

The first rank in the diaconate, that of reader, has as its principal function the reading of the Scriptures and their interpretation for the congregation. It almost became a tradition that boys were ordained readers at early age and were bound to Bible study and its ministry ever since.

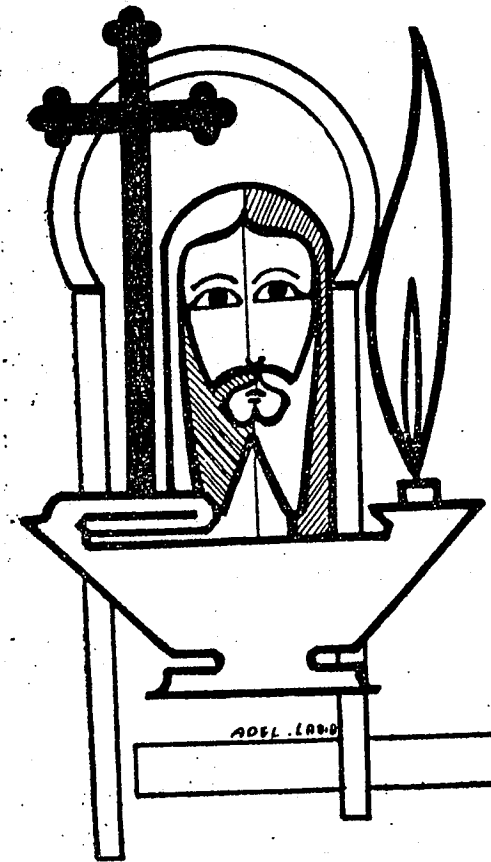
Most Coptic Churches organize Bible Study meetings led by priests or laymen — mostly readers — and these are a source of inspiration to family and private Bible Study.

— HIS ACT OF REDEMPTION

NEW LIFE FOR BELIEVERS

Like all Christian Churches, The Coptic Church glorifies the Lord for His grace of redemption which He freely offered to man. At many places in the Old Testament, the believers were taught to expect this grace-ful act of their Lord.

A short time before the crucifixion, He said the parable of the owner of the vineyard who rented it to some tenants that turned to ill-treat his messengers and killed his son in the end. Jesus Christ was referring to Himself being crucified. He then referred to Psalm 118. 22-23 which speaks of Him being the only way to the kingdom of heavens. "Have you not read this scripture : The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner, this was the Lord's



doing and it is marvelous in our eyes ? (Mark 12. 10-11).

Peter referred to the same and said "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved". (Acts 4. 12). St. Paul, referring to Isaiah 28.16 says "The Scripture says, "No one who believes in Him will be put to shame," (Ro.10.11).

A sincere Jewish teacher of the Law went one night to the Lord and expressed a sense of great regard to Him and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" Nicodemus wanted to know who Jesus was and to receive a blessing from him. The Lord's answer was that what counted then was no question of regard for wisdom or power. It was time to believe in redemption and be reborn. (John 3.1-21).

This is the new life offered to all human beings who follow the Lord. Paul says "For this reason, I Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles — assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me. For you know how the mystery was made known to me by revelation — which — has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is how the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph. 3.1-6). The simple fisherman Peter says "By His great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time". (I Pet. 1. 3-5).

## b — WHO IS JESUS CHRIST

The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the group called Oriental or Non-chalcedonian Orthodox Churches. The



separation between these Churches and Europe took place in 451 at the time of the Council of Chalcedon.

There was the controversy about the nature of our Lord whether He would be described as having one or two natures. The Oriental Churches cling to the idea of the One Nature in Him, and are therefore called Monophysites in contrast with the Duophysites of the West.

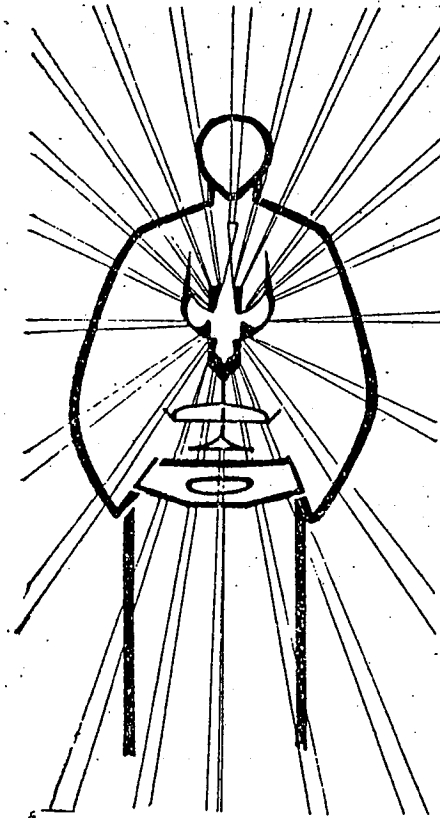
There had been two extreme heresies before the division. Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople said that The Lord was a human being in whom the Holy Spirit came to dwell at his baptism,

and that in him there is fellowship but not unity between the divinity and the humanity. This concept was refuted by St. Cyril of Alexandria and all the Council of Ephesus in 431, as being a denial that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate.

Eutyches, a monk from a monastery outside Constantinople who fought strongly against Nestorianism, believed that the divine nature of Christ so absorbed the human as to leave it existing only ephemerally. This view was condemned by the whole Church as denying our Lord's full humanity.

At the Council of Chalcedon, Western Churches adopted Pope Leo of Rome's Tome which repudiated the Eutychian heresy, but which spoke in a curious way about two natures in our Lord. "The One (the divine) is resplendent with miracles, the other (the human) submits to insults. The Word withdraws not from his equality with the Father's glory; the Flesh does not desert the nature of our kind. And so it does not belong to the same nature to say I and the Father are one ..." The Orientals felt that this Duophysitism smacked of a reversion to Nestorianism, that there was in Christ only a fellowship between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, not an unity. This belief, they understood, shook the foundation of our salvation which could only be based on the ground that Christ has one composite nature.

European Churches, wrongly enviraged the "Monophysite" Oriental Churches as Eutychians while the Orientals viewed



"Duophysitism" to be going hand-in-hand with Nestorianism.

We believe there was no moment in history at which existed a separate human nature of the Lord to be united to His Divine nature. At the act of incarnation The Word become flesh. "He (= God) dwelt among us". (John 1. 14). The Oriental Churches have never formulated their Christology in terms of God + Man = Jesus Christ. They have always preferred to express their view as God Incarnate = God-Man = Jesus

Christ. "That (i.e. God) which was ..." (I John 1.1).

Apart from the theological causes of the Schism of 451, recent research has clearly revealed that non-theological factors also contributed to the misunderstanding. Many Church historians have indicated that political divergences, even between Imperial and Colonial Churches, also played a part in the tragic division of the Church.

The Lord be praised that the time of emotional controversies has long gone by. Christians on the various sides can see the right things in each other's doctrines. It is time to express penitence for the past faulty views and acts of ill-treatment that befell many good Christians in the name of Him who denied the use of violence.

### Chapter III

#### SALVATION; A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

##### a — RESTORATION TO GOD'S SONSHIP

There is a mystery about man's creation that he was completed by a breath of God. He is in a sense, meant to be a sharer of God's nature. He is made in God's image "in our image, after our likeness (Gen. 1. 26) ... men who are made in the likeness of God." (James 3. 9).

There is this mysterious act of Christianity; that it brings man, whom sin has separated from his father God, back to his proper position. God's son was sent "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Phi. 2.7), even the likeness of sinful flesh, "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh." (Ro. 8. 3).

The Lord regrafted us in the Vine of Life and made us branches in Him once more to live upon Him forever. "And from His fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. (John 1. 16). "Now The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (II. Cor. 3. 17-18).

Those who were created in His own image are no more alien to Him, but have been called "to His own glory ... and become partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 2. 3-4). Having been re-grafted in Him, they continue to live on Him for ever. "Beloved, we are God's children now, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (I John 3. 2) "Truly I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14. 25).

It is in this concept that the Sacraments are viewed in the Oriental Church. They are actions through which the believer is made part of and to grow on the Lord. The Lord's supper, for instance, cannot be merely a meal of commemoration, and a sharing of food and drink but a fact that branches share the substance of the stem.

#### b — MAN'S CONTINUOUS ACT OF RESPONSE

The Lord's act of redemption is complete in itself, sufficient for the cleansing of all human beings, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Ro. 8. 1). The New Life that we receive from Him is like when children are born. They are fully, not partially born from their mothers. "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellent, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises." (II Pet. 1. 3-4).

This life, however, has to be maintained healthy and in continuous growth. To achieve this, it could be said that a Christian has to be responding in three directions :

- a. To be on the guard against the ills of the Old Nature;
- b. To be nourished on the foods of the new life;
- c. To maintain the activity of the new nature, the functioning and the productivity of its powers.

St. Peter proceeds, from the previous passage, to say "... that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 1.4).

a — The Lord who said "... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mat. 11. 30) said also "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Mat. 7. 13-14) "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." (Phi 2.12) "Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating in the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (I Cor. 9. 26-27).

b — These are blessings obtained through private and commune relation with the Lord. Prayer is to be practised individually and communely and at all times, "We ought always to pray and not to lose heart". (Luke 18.1). The



Scriptures are another fundamental source of power. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Mat. 4.4). Spiritual gatherings for worship, study and praise are a basis for life. Fasts, contributing to the needs of others are proper acts of worship. "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Ro. 12. 1-2).

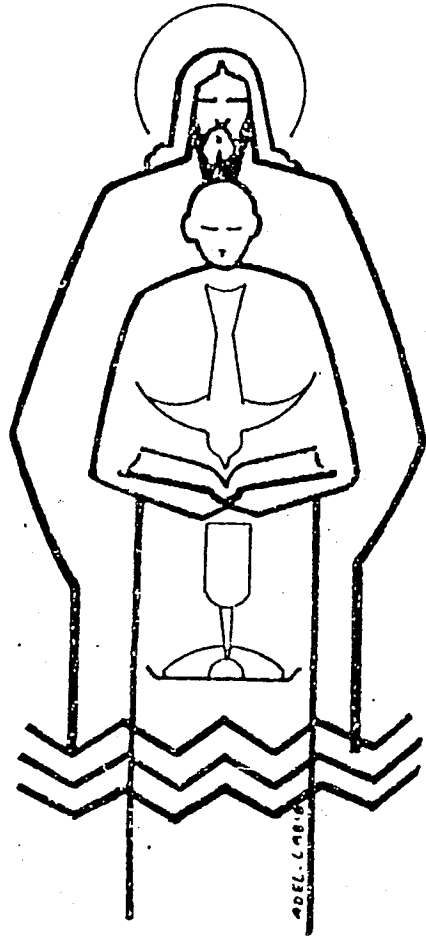
c — As for active functioning, St. Peter again says: "For this reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if those things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election for if you do this you will never fall. So there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 1. 5-11).

St. Paul also says "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving, he who teaches ..., he who exhorts ..., he who contributes ..., love one another with brotherly affection ... Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit." (Ro. 12 6-11).

"Hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Thes. 5. 22-23). "For salvation is nearer to us now than we first believed" (Ro. 13.11).

Chapter IV  
THE SACRAMENTS,  
PRACTICES OF SANCTIFICATION

a. — MAN'S WHOLE NATURE



The relationship between God and the believers is not one of intellectual responses in which, for example, they demand and He gives or He commands and they obey. The religious experience is rather an involvement. Christianity is not a theory or a gospel to be taught. The new life, the change of nature which the faithful person undergoes is a fact, and it takes place through a totally divine act. "For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3. 27). That God's Spirit dwells in man is not based on any human virtue, but is a favour of His grace.

Moreover, God's dwelling in man is a mystery in itself. It cannot be subjected to human measures; it can only

be experienced. When Nicodemus wanted to hear about this invisible operation, the Lord illustrated it with simple emphasis. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit .... We speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen." (John 3. 8-11).

Christianity of the Middle Ages in Europe might have misinterpreted the mysterious work of God in people when it deprived it of the conscious belief and response on man's part. The following ages highlighted the individual's awareness of the work of redemption. Christian experience may be said briefly to consist of belief, joyful acceptance of the mystery of recreation and continuous conscious participation in the new eternal life.

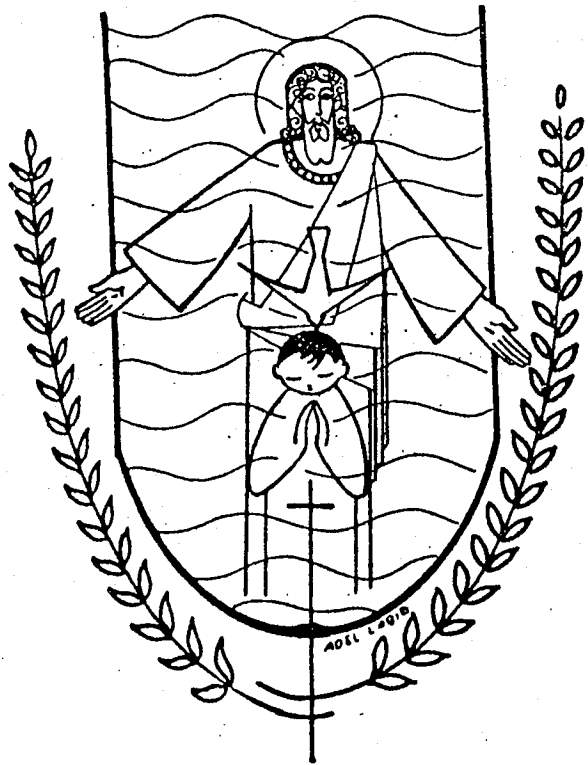
b. SANCTIFICATION, A CONTINUOUS ACT

In the Creation story, God rested on the Sabbath, but ever since He has been continuously at work, maintaining the created universe. The act of the new creation of man was achieved during the period of His incarnation. This period came to an end, but the work of the renewal of the creatures is continuing.

A Christian has ever to be aware of this fellowship with the Lord. He prays to him, praises Him, listens to and obeys His instructions. He has also to be always responsive to His purifying and regenerating activity.

## 10. THE SACRAMENTS

The Sacraments are continuous means of sanctification. A believer is sanctified through baptism, and is cleansed from the life of death with which he was born. "Baptism" says St. Peter "which corresponds to this (The Ark of Noah) now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 3. 21).



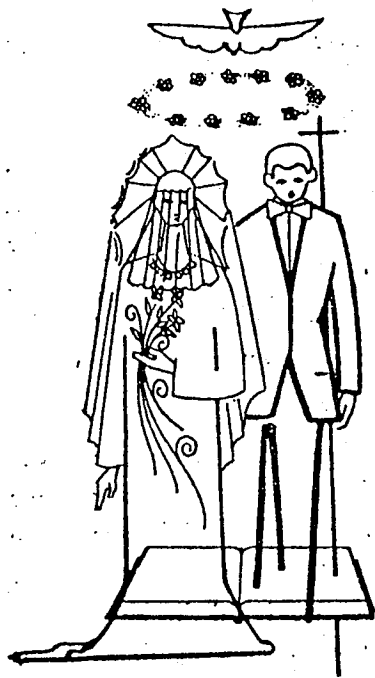
The dwelling of the Holy Spirit takes place through confirmation or "Chrismation" which was originally the laying of the bishop's hands. "And they said : No, we have never

heard that there is a Holy Spirit". And he said, "Into what were you baptised ?" They said, "Into the John's baptism". And Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is in Jesus". On hearing this they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them the Holy Spirit came on them. (Acts 19.2-7). The combined act of Baptism and Confirmation is the gift of the new life. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal. 3. 27).

Yet a Christian is liable to commit mistakes and there must be available to him a way to be continuously cleansed and restored to full communion with Christ. He has, as it were, to offer his feet to the Church, which It washes and dries. If he refrains from so doing he loses his position in the Lord. "If I do not wash you (your feet) you have no part in me." (John 13. 8). The Sacrament of penance brings us into this process of the renewed action of purification. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness." (I John 1. 9). The initial act of cleansing in baptism cannot be repeated; its work is to be renewed in Penance. "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over." (John 13. 10).

In the Sacrament of the Holy Communion, the believer is reconfirmed in the Lord. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." (John 6. 56). Accordingly, the Coptic Church allows children to communicate since baptism.

The Unction of the Sick also has a clear place in the life of the Church. "Is any among you sick? Let him call the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:..." (James 5. 14-15). Whenever a believer is ill he may ask to be anointed; The Unction of The Sick is not reserved only for those at the point of death.



Christian marriage is not simply a transaction between two individuals. It is a bond which the Lord himself forms and sanctifies "And the two shall become one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Mark 10. 9-10). "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery." (Eph. 5. 31-32).

Priesthood is a great sacramental gift for the maintenance and solidarity of the Christian community — the Church — and the member individuals. God bestows upon a certain man the

powers to officiate the sacraments and undertake the pastoral responsibilities of the flock. "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the secrets of God." (I Co. 4.1). The Holy Spirit grants him these powers through the prayer of the bishops (successors of the Apostles) and the laying on of their hands. "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the hand of priesthood were laid upon you." (I Tim. 4. 14).

#### d — THEIR FOUNDATION

The administration of these acts of sanctification was entrusted to the disciples by the Lord who also trained them to perform them. For instance. He baptised people (John 3. 22) and made the disciples baptise under His supervision. (John 4. 1-2). They anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them." (Mark 6. 13). They received the capacity to declare the forgiveness of sins. "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mat. 18.18).

Nevertheless, the believer must never fall into the error of separating the function and efficacy of the sacraments from the central process of salvation and redemption and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The sacraments are based on God's redeeming activity and always go hand in hand with conscious faith. The efficacy of the sacraments depends, it is true, on God's unfailing promises and the work of the Holy Spirit. But unfaithfulness on the part of the believer renders him incapable of benefitting from the grace offered to him; and

insincerity on the part of the priest makes him an unworthy instrument — deserving condemnation. Thus the Sacramental life of the Church demands that the believer be involved with and committed to the mystery, in which he participates, constantly renewing his responsiveness and submission to the work of salvation which God is accomplishing in him. In this way he is sanctified and grows in communion with God.

## THE CHURCH, THE CAMPUS OF ALL

### a — THE BODY OF CHRIST

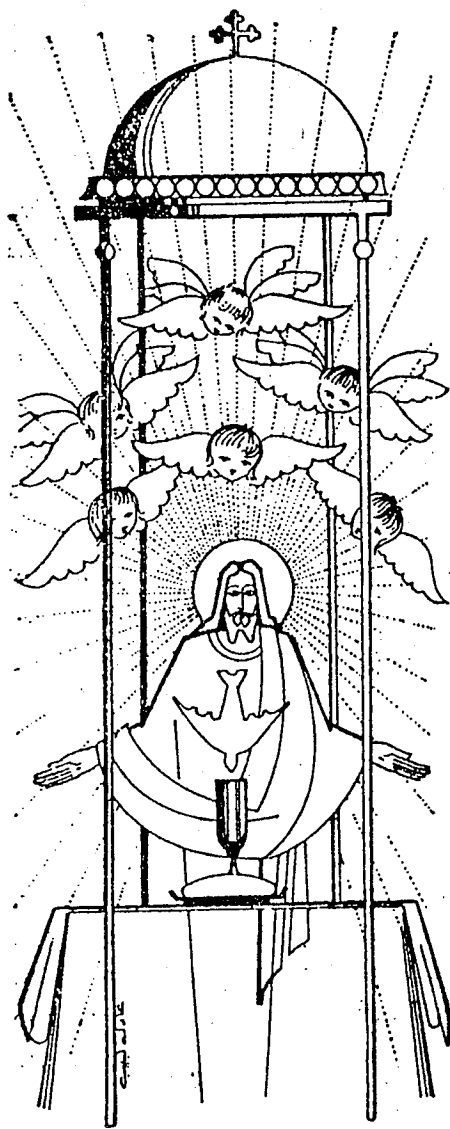
The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. (Gen. 2. 7). There is no wonder that after man had lost his holiness, God re-created him through physical involvement with Himself. “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” (John 1.14). The Church (ecclesia = Community) is His body. “... the head over all things for the Church, which is his body...” (Eph. 1. 22-23).

### b — THREE SIGNIFICANCIES

The word “Church” has three significancies :

- a — The Community of believers “And great fear came upon the whole church ...” (Acts 5. 11).
- b — The Clergy : “If he refuses to listen to them (mediators) tell it to the Church ... Truly, I say to you whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Mat. 18. 17-18).
- c — The house, the meeting place, which is a common usage (see also I Co. 14. 19 and 34).

Through the Coptic liturgy, there are three Intercessions repeated many times which encompass the various aspects of the Church, The Intercession for The Community, generally known as the Intercession for ‘Peace’, that of the Fathers and the third for Congregational houses.



was a child I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,

The Lord's body includes the believers who are still striving on Earth as well as the victors in Heaven. "Through Him, to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in Heaven." (Co.1.20). The believers' Communion with the Lord is, at the same time, communion with the Saints whether they are still in the flesh or beyond it. All join in praising the Lord, in supplication and brotherly love.

In the metaphysical world, distance loses its significance. A Spirit can see things at very large distance and can cross space in no time. The spirits' capacity for knowledge is incredibly greater than human beings no earth. "When I

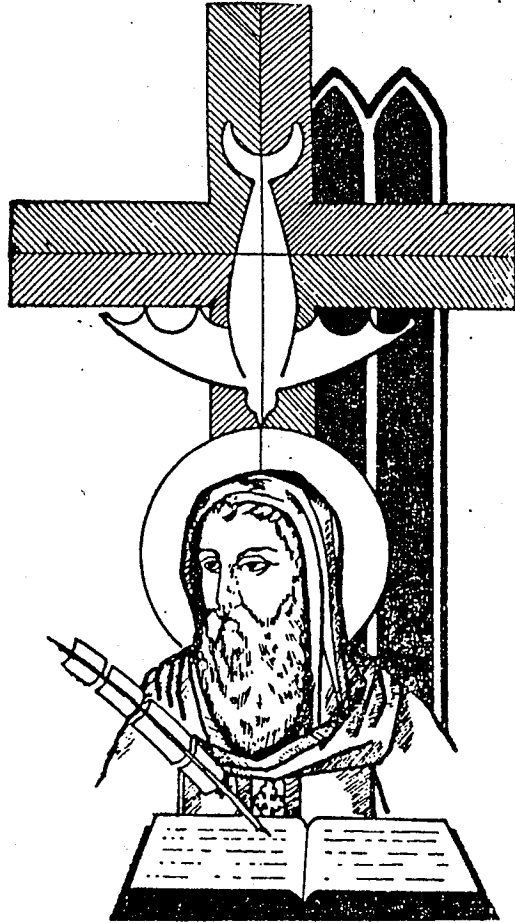
when I became a man I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (by heavenly creatures) (I Co. 13, 11-12). Our communion with the saints is strong, their care for us is great and their prayers for us are very helpful.

Nevertheless, we do not believe they have any co-redeptive powers. Redemption is the work of the Lord alone, and in this sense He is the only mediator. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all." (I Tim 2. 5-6). The saints do not give bounty to striving human beings out of the surplus of their benevolence achieved during their early life. Whatever good a person is, he is imperfect in comparison with the Lord. The indispensable role of the heavenly spirits — angels and human — is in their prayers and supplications, "He (the angel) was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints." (Rev. 8. 4).

It is noteworthy that through communion there is prayer on both sides — earthly and heavenly. During the Liturgy, there is a part of the Commemoration of these saints in which some are mentioned in name and 'all the others' in general. The response of the congregation is uniquely significant of the practice of mutual prayers. "Their holy blessings be with us all. Amen. Glory be to Thee, Lord. Lord have mercy upon us, Lord, give us Thy blessing. Lord give rest to them. Amen."

## THE CREED

Truly we believe in one God, God The Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of the all things visible and invisible.



St. Athanasius,  
the great figure among the  
authors of the Creed.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the unique son of God, begotten of the Father before all times, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by The Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, and was buried and the third day he rose again

according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven. He sitteth on the right hand of the Father, And He shall come again with His glory to judge the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and who speaks through the prophets.

And we believe in one Catholic and Apostolic Church, we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

A m e n

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| Contents  | Page |
|---|------|
| Foreword .....  | 3    |
| Chapter I. The Role of the Bible .....                        | 5    |
| Chapter II. The Lord Our Redeemer .....                       | 8    |
| Chapter III. Salvation, a continuous process .....            | 14   |
| Chapter IV. The Sacraments, Practices of Sanctification ..... | 19   |
| Chapter V. The Church, The Corpus of all .....                | 26   |
| The Creed .....   | 29   |
| Bibliography .....  | 31   |

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