Podcasts

- 2024-07-19 Keepin It Apostolic

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Questions: Ethos

Can you share with us your background and journey into studying Church Rites? What initially drew you to this field of study?

My name is Morcous Wahba, I am first and foremost a Coptic Orthodox Christian. I am a husband and a father. I serve as a Subdeacon in my parish in Orlando, FL, and I'm a Software Engineer by trade.

Of course, growing up in the Southern Diocese, we had the great model of HG Bishop Youssef; when he visited our churches and prayed tasbeha with us; when he encouraged the chanting of hymns during liturgy, etc; when he would release a press release about the rites of the church like "this Sunday we will be celebrating the 29th of the Coptic month instead of the fifth Sunday of the month."

I remember when I was in elementary school or middle school, HG wanted the Aspasmos Adam and Aspasmos Watos to be learned and chanted in the churches in English. So he sent out a note to all the churches that for the first half of the year, every church should sing Rejoice O Mary every Sunday and for the second half of the year, every church should sing O Lord God of Hosts. And I remember the servants teaching us these two hymns and chanting them every Sunday until everyone learned them.

I had great servants in my church, who encouraged us to learn hymns and who modeled for us the true spirit of hymnology. When I was in elementary or middle school is when websites like coptichymns.net and tasbeha.org started to appear - and they had recordings of hymns for all occasions. They had forums where people would discuss the rites of the Church.

I remember when the Deacons Service book came out by Albair Mikhail - "Al Assess fe khedmet el shammas" and it had all the hymns in it and a bunch of Arabic text that I couldn't read. And then when the same servant, Albair, released the HCOC CDs (Heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church) and they were high quality group recordings for all of the hymns. We would buy all these things and use them to learn.

As with most youth, I had questions about the Church Rites... like why do we say □□□□□□ □□□□ (a hymn about the robe of Aaron) instead of Saved Amen when the Bishop is present? You start to look for answers, read books, watch videos, ask priests and bishops, etc.

All of these things kind of cultivated in me the love of all things ritual.

What do you say to people who have the mindset of “who cares” about Church Rites?

I mean I think the answer is "God cares."

The concept of ritual was not just invented by man, but it has been an expression of worship that is acceptable to God since the beginning. As early as Cain and Abel, we see that God distinguishes between what is acceptable and unacceptable offering. In Noah, we see him build an altar and offer clean animals after coming out of the ark. Same with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was God who in Exodus specifically laid out how the Tabernacle should be constructed - what materials, how much of each material, how they are arranged, etc. It was God who in Leviticus ordained specific instructions for each of the burnt offerings, and ordained feasts, and the rituals for the day of atonement and the raising of incense day and night, and the showbread and the lighting of the candles and the vestments of the priests, and all of those things. It was God who gave the rites for anointing of priests and anointing of kings.

It was actually the people who said "who cares" in the Old Testament who ended up being rebuked or punished by God. Nadab and Abihu the sons of Aaron, the sons of Eli, King Saul, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, etc.

So I don't think the mindset of "who cares" is appropriate at all.

But there are other negative attitudes when it comes to the Rites and Hymns of the Church. One that I hear pretty often is "Rites were made for man and not man for rites." It's a rewording of the verse from the Gospels that "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, therefore the Son of Man also is Lord of the Sabbath." Like the Rites were made FOR you, to HELP you, to ENHANCE your relationship with God; you were not created to be a SLAVE to the rites. And the Lord Jesus said those words right after he said something similar - he quoted from Hosea saying "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Both of those verses, when taken outside of their context, seem to say that Rites are not important to the Lord. But we have to distinguish between broadly applying those words, and applying them within their context.

The Pharisees were very extreme. For example, when the Lord rebukes them, He tells them "Woe to you" for you tithe mint and rue and anise and pass by justice and love of God. He's telling them like you go and measure out 10% of your spices to offer as a tithe, but in your dealings with people, you are not just. You do not love God. You do not love your neighbor. You're just doing it for the sake of ritual. And so He rebukes them. But there's a very important phrase that He says in that same breath: "these you ought to have done without leaving the others undone." Do both!

We do like the Pharisees sometimes: we do ritual at the expense of our brother. I can imagine a scenario where a deacon is holding the censer for Abouna, and another deacon rushes over and takes it from him to make sure it gets held the "the right way." Or a deacon says a hymn the wrong way, or makes a mistake, and someone else rushes over to correct him or make an example of him or something like that. Or the fights for the microphone that happen in some places. Or the arguments that happen over the "correct ritual" and the "only way to do it." In those cases, someone might be doing ritual, but without love of God or love of neighbor. Without mercy or justice. And it will not be acceptable to God.

But when we do ritual in the correct way, it will be well-pleasing to God.

How do you see Church Rites evolving or adapting to contemporary cultural and societal changes?

I remember in his first few years as Pope, HH Pope Tawadros was discussing in Egypt the Litany of the Waters. And he's telling the people "we're praying for the Nile! Why should the believers in America pray for the Nile River? They should pray for the Mississippi River!" It was so funny, but it also showed very clearly that HH understood that there are pastoral needs in different places and at different times.

HH Pope Shenouda III recommended to the Synod to add a word to the Litany of the Travelers: "Air" - those who are traveling by rivers, seas, roads, lakes [air]. This was a response to a societal change; the invention and widespread use of air travel.

In the time of HH Pope Shenouda also, they added a small one-line litany to the Litanies that start with "Yea we ask You O Christ our God..." - "Success to the students, work for the needy." There was a need in society at that time, and it was added.

There is a liturgical scholar by the name of Fr Robert J Taft (Catholic) who said "There is no ideal form of the liturgy from the past that must be imitated, liturgy has always changed."

All this to show that the Church and the hierarchy of the Church is aware of the pastoral needs and is not opposed to modifying the liturgical text, or even the rituals for the sake of those pastoral needs.

Are there any challenges or opportunities you foresee in this regard?

I think technology is both the biggest opportunity, but also the biggest challenge.

The history and historical development of our ritual is accessible to the general public now more than ever. Coptic Manuscripts that are scattered at museums around the world, are accessible at our fingertips. Large groups on Social Media are dedicated to discussion of ritual and some of the very knowledgeable academics frequently participate in those groups. People are starting to be more interested in ritual, and particularly in restoring rituals that we have lost or that we have lost their meaning. So it's an opportunity to restore to practice that which was lost.

But that also comes with a word of caution. We have to recognize that the ritual - the same scholar mentioned before, Fr Robert Taft wrote "As a historian, my job is not to change the tradition, but to tell the truth about what happened. It is the job of the hierarchs to decide what to do about it." He does the job of the historian, figuring out what the facts were - but he leaves the job of reform or evolution or change to the hierarchs of the church. Sometimes, people in their zeal for returning to "the original" forget to account for the fact that there might be a reason it changed in the first place. Sometimes, those who are engulfed in the academia and the sources, are not quite as in tune with the pastoral needs of the flock.

But unfortunately, even when that happens, we're met with challenges.

When HE Metropolitan Youssef announced through the diocese the establishment of American Coptic Orthodox Churches, people in Egypt went wild. It spread across Social Media and with every share, a new more misleading comment was attached to it. His Eminence was just serving his flock in a way that made sense for them. And by God's grace, those churches have found much success in our diocese. When HE Metropolitan Serapion allowed some churches to celebrate Nativity Feast on Christmas morning Dec 25, if there was a pastoral need, people in Egypt went wild. Again, it spread across Social Media and misleading comments were everywhere.

And vice versa - when a church in Upper Egypt has some diversity in their ritual and it gets posted on social media and shared everywhere, people - even here in the States - go on the offensive. You can't blame them for their zeal in remaining "unchanged" but it presents an obstacle for evolving Church Rites to address pastoral needs.

So we can see how technology can be both an opportunity and a challenge.

How do you navigate the balance between preserving the traditions of Church Rites and responding to the needs of a changing community?

This is the definition of pastoral care. How do you minister to a group of people in a way that makes sense to them, without compromising the dogma and traditions of the Church? And to say it differently, how do you minister to the people in such a way that brings them closer to the dogma and traditions and spirituality of the Church, particularly the Eucharist.

Questions: In-depth

Church Rites

Can you explain what Church Rites encompass and their significance within religious practice?

The significance of Ritual in our religious practice can't be understated. Any time you walk into a liturgical service, there is ritual being performed. Whether it's Abouna with the censer, or a procession of the deacons, or the way that someone enters or leaves the sanctuary, etc. It's a core part of our liturgical service. If you walked into a church and didn't see these components, you would not think it's a Coptic Church, or even an Orthodox Church. So what is ritual?

The Divine Liturgy in general, and the Eucharist in particular, remove the boundaries of time. We are abiding in Christ and He in Us... but Christ is eternal. We commemorate the Passions, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ - all events that actually happened in history - but we also commemorate the Second Coming which in the context of our time, hasn't happened yet. The Divine Liturgy also removes the boundaries of space. When we celebrate the Liturgy, we are celebrating with all of the other churches around the world in the past, present and future. We are partaking of Christ's One Body and Blood.

Ritual refers to the tradition that was developed and refined over many centuries, that grounds us to liturgical time and place. It lets us - corporeal and temporal beings - participate with the Incorporeal and Eternal. When we observe ritual, we experience the heavenly.

For example, when we sing the part of the liturgy called the Sanctus: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and Earth are full of Your holy glory." The words of this hymn are from Isaiah 6 when Isaiah saw the Seraphim and describes them with their wings and how they call to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" - we are not just repeating their phrases, but we are chanting WITH them. We are participating with them.

And the Church gives us many different things that fall under the heading of "Ritual" and that contribute to this experience: we have raising incense, singing hymns, holding candles, vestments of the clergy, the readings, the fasts and feasts, processions, iconography, the shape of the church building and the baptismal font, etc.

What are some common examples of Church Rites that people might encounter in different denominations?

One thing that comes to mind (and ironically it's not from any sort of denomination, but from the secular world) is graduation ceremonies.

Every year when I attend a graduation ceremony it's so funny to me - they are wearing specific robes and hats and based on what degree you have, your robe and hat are different. They walk in with a procession usually, and with specific music for that procession. At HS Graduations (at least in Florida), they bring the Student Government President to pass the torch to the next Student Government President. What's the point of all this? Could it be done without all this?

During COVID, many graduations (HS and College) were cancelled. The people who were graduating that year felt like they missed a milestone. I read an article that said a university was cancelling their graduation ceremony this year due to protests on campus (about the war). And one of the people who commented said "My high school graduation was cancelled for COVID, and now this... it feels like my class is cursed." - These celebrations of achievement are "rites of passage" (note the wording there... rites of passage) and when they are skipped, someone may feel like he hasn't moved on.

And there are many other examples within both secular society and across various faiths: Inauguration of a president, weddings, funerals, coronation of a king, etc.

Rituals ground us to certain milestones of life and of society. They give a sense of meaning and help to establish a shared identity.

How have Church Rites evolved over time, and what factors influence their adaptation in modern contexts?

What theological principles underpin various Church Rites, and how do these principles shape their practice?

Of course, everything that we know about God is through revelation. In the Orthodox Church, we don't say that dogma or theology is "developed" as other Churches might say, but that it is

revealed. Revealed through the Scripture and through the Church - including through Councils and canons of the Church, through liturgy, through patristic writings, through art like iconography and the church hymns, and also through ritual.

How do Church Rites reflect and reinforce theological beliefs and doctrines within different religious traditions?

There are also many things in the rites of the Church - like in the liturgy when Abouna signs the congregation. During the beginning of the Anaphora, he does three signings. He signs the people with "The Lord be with you all" and then the sanctuary deacons with "Lift up your hearts" and then himself with "Let us give thanks to the Lord." And then the next signings are at "Agios" where he signs himself on the first one, the deacons on the second one and the people on the third one. It's inversed. And it expresses the equality of all of us - people, deacons and priest - in needing this Mystery, and in needing salvation and forgiveness of sin, and in needing to eat of the Eucharist.

When we have a procession in the Church, we always go counterclockwise which reminds us that we are moving contrary to the world. But when we do the procession of Judas, we move clockwise because he moved with the world.

Of course also the text of the liturgy, the psalmody and the hymns are integral to the expression of our theology and doctrine.

An example from the Thursday Theotokia - "We have become worthy to have, the Tree of Life to eat from, which is the Body of God, and His True Blood" - See how this expresses for us the understanding that the Tree of Life which is mentioned in Genesis and in Revelation is the Eucharist. And even the wording of "Body of God" (□□□□ □□□□ †) expresses that Christ is God and that His Humanity (including His Body) is united with His Divinity in One Nature.

An example from Sunday Theotokia - we say "One Nature out of Two: A holy Divinity coessential with the Father and incorruptible. A holy Humanity begotten without seed coessential with us according to the Economy."

In the 12th Century, we had a very important patriarch named Pope Gabriel II Ibn Turaik. In the History of the Patriarchs, you can read a story about his first few days as patriarch. It was the custom back then to go to the monastery of St Macarius after your consecration as patriarch. And when he went, and he was praying the liturgy, he came to the Confession at the end and said "I believe that this is the Body of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, which He took from our Lady the Theotokos Saint Mary, He made it one with His Divinity" - and when the the monks of St Macarius heard those words "He made it one with His Divinity" they were like "it is not our custom to say those words." It's not what was passed down to them. They weren't against those words as a theological belief, but it was just not part of their received tradition. So they refused to accept it. But Pope Gabriel told them "this is how it was transmitted to me by the bishops on the day of my consecration as patriarch." So both of them were firm in their stance. They resolved it by adding to "He made it One with His Divinity without mingling, without confusion and without alteration." And until today that is what we use in the Church.

Church Rites and My Life

How can individuals incorporate Church Rites into their daily spiritual routines or personal lives? What benefits do people derive from actively participating in Church Rites?

There is a strong link between communal prayer and personal prayer. So for example, when you are praying by yourself in your room, you will still say "Our Father who art in heaven" and "We believe in one God" and even "Make US worthy to pray thankfully." Even if I am by myself, I remember that I am part of the Body of Christ and everyone else is included in my prayer. And when you are standing in communal liturgy, you find responses like "I believe" or for example in Pascha "My Lord Jesus Christ, My Good Savior, the Lord is My Strength and My praise..."

On top of that, there is room for private prayer, you are still (in the words of Abouna in the Liturgy) lifting up your hearts to the Lord. On top of that, my participation in Liturgy will enhance my personal private prayers, and my personal private prayers will enhance my participation in Liturgy.

Some people treat the Liturgy as a show that they watch... they come to the Liturgy, stand in their place and become silent observers. If we treat the Liturgy like a show, not only will we miss out on the actual experience and participation that we've been talking about, but we're more likely to just get completely distracted. The Liturgy is not a very entertaining show to watch! So if it starts to get boring, I start to divert my attention elsewhere and get distracted with my social media, or a game on my phone, or reading the news, or trying to "multi-task" during the Liturgy.

But we are not meant to be watchers or observers of liturgy, but rather active participants. When you go to a show, the entertainer is facing you and he's trying to make you laugh or invoke an emotional response - but when you come to the liturgy, the priest is not facing you, but he's facing east WITH you, because he, LIKE you, is a participant. He, like you, needs repentance. He, like you, needs to eat of the Eucharist. He, like you, needs salvation. So I, like him, should participate in the Liturgy.

What does participation look like?

It takes several different forms, and the good news is that there are instructions given throughout the liturgy by the deacon, that tell us or remind us with what to do.

So the first form is the participation of the body.

- So the deacon will say "You who are seated, stand." Okay, so I'll stand up. But even that is participation with the heavenly because Abouna says right after it "Before Whom stand, the angels the archangels, the principalities, the authorities, the thrones, the dominions and the powers."
- And then the deacon will say "Look towards the East." Okay, so I'll face the east.
- Or when the deacon says "Bow your heads to the Lord"
- Or when the deacon says "Worship God in fear and trembling"
- All of those are examples of participation of our body in the liturgical worship.

Second form is participation of the spirit.

- When the deacon says "Pray for the peace of the one, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Orthodox Church of God." He's telling you what to pray for, and what to remember in your prayers. Remember the peace within the Church at large, remember our brothers in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church and pray for the success of the Ecumenical Dialogues. Remember those Christians that are Protestants, and pray that they come to the knowledge of the fullness of the truth. Remember the peace in your diocese and in your local parish. Actively participate in the prayers and like Abouna says in the beginning of the liturgy, "lift up your hearts"
- When the deacon says "Pray for our Archpriest Pope Abba Tawadros and his partner Metropolitan Youssef and all our orthodox bishops" - pray for them. One by one. Name by name. Of course remembering also HG Bishop Basil and HG Bishop Gregory if you're in the SUS Diocese. Or all of the bishops of North America by name. Pray that the Lord give them long life to shepherd their flock, that He remove obstacles from before them, that He gives them rest because we know how much our fathers the bishops labor for us. Remember them in your prayers.
- The same with all litanies and all prayers. Take the communal prayer and make it personal.

Finally, participation with chanting the hymns and responses. Participate in every single □□□□□ □□□□□□ (Lord have Mercy). HG Bishop Mettaous in one of his books about the Liturgy *he talks about how you can make each one different. And this responds to the people who say "oh Jesus said don't be like the heretics with vain repetitions." It's your job to make them not vain repetitions. Again, don't do ritual for the sake of ritual, but let the ritual guide your worship.*

So now, after participating in the liturgy, when I go back to my home to stand for prayer, there is no longer the question of "I don't know what to say." In Liturgy when you followed the instructions of the deacon, you set a model for yourself of how to pray, what to pray for, and who to remember. Now when you go home, you won't find yourself lacking in words.

Another thing - people think that praying at home is just with the Agpeya. And it is very important to pray the Psalms and the Hours. But you can also sing hymns. You can sing parts of the Tasbeha. You can sing the Morning Doxology in the morning and the Theotokia of the day in the evening. While you're driving, you can sing hymns and praises. All of these contribute to your prayer life - and when you do them outside of liturgy, they will also contribute to your experience inside liturgy.

In what ways do Church Rites foster a sense of community and belonging among believers?

If you think about a graduation ceremony, it's the one single time that the entire student body comes together as one.

If you think about a wedding or funeral, these are the few times that all members of an extended family might come together as one (either to celebrate or to mourn).

And if you think about the Church, when we observe specific rituals, is when we come together as one. Think about the Resurrection Feast and how it is the one night of the year that the entire body

of believers makes a conscious effort to be there and the church is packed, as we all observe the ritual.

Ritual brings us together. It is an expression of the Biblical Truth that we are all members of One Body and Christ is the head.

Not only that, but when we come together, we are stronger. HG Bishop Basil on the evening of the consecration of St Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Ft Myers, FL was giving the Vespers sermon and he said "how many of us can go home and stand all night in prayer and reading the Scripture? None of us. But when we come together for a 14 hour consecration overnight, we are supporting each other and able to pray together and stay without getting tired." And he is so right.

Have there been historical moments or movements that significantly impacted the practice and interpretation of Church Rites?

Liturgy is ever-evolving. Sometimes something may change based on pastoral needs of the people.

Sometimes something may change based on trying to uphold the Tradition of the Church in the face of persecution. So when the government says "you can't build any more churches" but the number of faithful is increasing daily, they build more altars within the same church and pray more than one liturgy in a day.

Can you share examples of individuals or communities whose lives have been profoundly influenced by their engagement with Church Rites?

How can Church leaders effectively guide and support congregants in integrating the spirit of Church Rites into their everyday lives?

Just like before, I think it all starts with the experience in liturgy. I'm very fortunate to serve in a parish with priests who support the teaching and chanting of hymns and consider it very highly as an integral part of the spiritual upbringing of our children. We teach and chant the Coptic Readings like □□□□□□ □□□□ , □□□□□□□□□ and □□□□□□ on a regular basis. We teach and chant long hymns like □□□□□□□ in the Great Fast or the great □□□□ □□□□□□□ on the Resurrection Feast. We teach and chant Coptic hymns as well as English hymns and we sing the Tasbeha not only in Arabic and English but also in Coptic. But to get to this point required a lot of time and requires a lot of trust between the father the priest and the servant who is coordinating the deacons and the servant who is coordinating Sunday School and Hymns Classes. It's important that everyone is on the same page, knowing that they're all pursuing the same goal.

Deacon leaders should be wise in choosing what hymns they will say, based on guidance from the father the priest who is more in tune with the pastoral needs of the congregation. In a certain parish - especially if it's a large parish - it may not be the best pastoral care for a deacon to chant a long hymn by himself. Whereas in a smaller parish, it may be okay. The father the priest may look at the congregation and out of a pastoral duty, tell the deacons that today we need to focus on English hymns. So we have to be knowledgeable to do that, but also flexible. So I think the first

point is that the deacons have to be on the same page as the father the priest, and follow his guidance and be flexible for the sake of the pastoral care of the congregation.

Another point for deacon leaders is to be wise in their use of microphones. Sometimes a microphone is needed especially to start a hymn, maintain the pace, change the pitch, adjust the tune, etc. But sometimes it's good to draw back and let the deacons and the congregation sing together.

Which leads to the third point - Education. It's so important in our churches to teach the Rites and Hymns to all ages - children, youth and adults; male and female. It's important to teach more difficult topics like Ritual Development to the servants, or pre-servants. It's important to integrate rituals and hymns in Sunday School lessons and sermons. And it's important that when we teach a hymn, we teach when it is chanted, and what is its meaning. And when we teach a ritual, we teach how it's done, but also why.

Wrap-Up

Looking back at our conversation today, what key insights or messages about Church Rites do you hope listeners take away?

I hope listeners will take from this podcast that the Rites and Hymns of the Church are for YOU. They're not just for the priest and the deacons. They're not just for a select group of deacons who are good at hymns. They're for you. No matter how old you are, or if you're male or female. They are for YOU and they can enhance your relationship with the Lord.

For our listeners interested in incorporating Church Rites more meaningfully into their lives, what practical steps or advice would you recommend?

Especially if you are someone who struggles to pray at home, try to incorporate some components of the Liturgy or Tasbeha into your prayer at home. Whether it's parts of the Tasbeha to sing, or if it's remembering the Litanies that we pray. Participate in the Liturgy with your body and your tongue and your spirit, and then take that experience home with you.

Is there anything else you'd like to share or emphasize about Church Rites before we conclude today's podcast?

If you want to learn more about the Rites and Hymns of the Church, I encourage you to check out the Asaph Hymns Institute. It's a Hymns Institute in our diocese of the Southern United States. It has several programs to serve a wide range of experience levels. There's also an annual convention which is open to all to attend (even if you're not a student). You can find the website through the Diocese or at www.sushymns.org.

The diocese also has a new convention that started last year called Liturgy and Life which is held in the St Mary and St Demiana Convent in Atlanta, GA in October. You can find more information through the Diocese website and social media.

If you want to read from some of the modern Liturgical Scholars of the Coptic Orthodox Church, I recommend that you pick up any of the books published by Fr Arsenius Mikhail (formerly Ramez Mikhail). Also the folks at Theology Academy have been hard at work translating many of the books authored by Fr Athanasius el Makari which cover a very wide array of topics in the field of Rites and Hymns which are also very good for reference.

What is a legacy you want to leave?

Let's drop the legacy question