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Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

THE VENERATION AND LITURGICAL CELEBRATION
OF THE VIRGIN MARY
IN THE COPTIC ORTHODOX TRADITION

By

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Virgin Mary is honored and venerated above all of the heavenly hosts and the saints. We honor and venerate her because she is blessed as was proclaimed, “blessed are you among women” (Lk 1:28), by the angel and by Elizabeth when she was filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:41–45). Otherwise, we are not honoring our Lord Jesus Christ and contradict the proclamation of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. The Virgin Mary herself acknowledged: “For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48). In Coptic iconography, the Virgin Mary’s exalted status is portrayed as that of the queen seated in the most honorable place, on the right of Christ the King (cf. Ps 45:9–12).

The Church of Egypt, in particular, has a unique relationship with the Mother of our Lord because of the three and a half years that the Holy Family resided in Egypt when they fled from Herod the Great (cf. Mat 2:13–21). The Blessed Virgin is considered the “swift (or light) cloud” (cf. Is 19:1) from whom the Word took flesh, who gave birth to Him, and brought Him to Egypt as an infant. The Lord’s flight and time in Egypt led to the eventual fulfillment of the prophecy: “In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border” (Is 19:19). Our Lord Jesus Christ with His Blessed Mother and St. Joseph blessed the land of Egypt, the only land outside of the land of Israel that they visited, and this blessing continued with the establishment and spreading of the Christian Church in Egypt and abroad.

The Coptic Orthodox Church’s rich liturgical tradition expresses this special relationship with the Virgin Mary through the biblical and patristic typology, terminology, analogies, and metaphors in its various liturgical prayers, praises, rites, menologies, and iconography. From the early centuries of Christianity, she is venerated because she is Theotokos or “God-bearer,”

because of the Virgin birth, her perpetual virginity, her purity and holiness, and her unique intercessory status before Christ. In fact, the evidence available to us today reveals Egypt to be one of the earliest places where most or all of these themes in the veneration of the Virgin Mary are manifest. The abundant material in the Coptic Orthodox liturgical tradition concerning the Virgin Mary will not allow for an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis in such a paper. Rather, the aim of this paper is to describe the main features of her veneration in the liturgical tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This analysis reveals a balanced understanding of the Virgin Mary's veneration that proclaims her exalted and unique status among all human beings because of the Incarnation of the Word but without granting her special privileges beyond the steps of salvation and the divine economy that is incumbent on every human being.

II. PRAYERS AND HYMNS

Among the numerous hymns and prayers that are related to the Holy Virgin Mary, the Theotokia, the introduction to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the troparia in the Coptic Horologion (Agpeya, Book of Hours) are probably the three most notable that are particular to the Coptic liturgical tradition. The Theotokia is a hymn in the Coptic Psalmody in praise of the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary. The structure of the Coptic Theotokia is distinct from both the Eastern Orthodox Theotokion and their counterpart in the Western Officium and Breviary.¹ This group of hymns is especially rich with numerous types, analogies, and metaphors for our Lord and the Virgin Mary, focusing mainly on the Incarnation in addition to other themes special to the Virgin Mary. Some scholars have attempted to attribute the

¹ De Lacy O'Leary, *The Daily Office and Theotokia of the Coptic Church* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1911), 53. There are seven separate Theotokions, one for each day of the week, that are metrical and sung in an antiphonal style. Typically there are seven to nine sections except for Sunday which is longer with a distinct repetitive stichon as a reply at the end of each section. The tune varies depending on the day of the week and the liturgical season.

authorship of these hymns to a single Church father such as St. Athanasius of Alexandria or St. Ephrem the Syrian, but the reality is that they are probably compilations of material from several Church fathers including Ss. Athanasius, Ephrem the Syrian, Cyril of Alexandria, Proclus of Constantinople, Hesychius of Jerusalem, Severus of Antioch, and Jacob of Sarug. Therefore, the Coptic tradition has not limited its prayers and teachings to only Egyptian saints, but it has also incorporated teachings from Church fathers outside of Egypt that express our most holy faith related to the Incarnation and the Holy Virgin Mary. Scholars believe that they were probably written some time before the Arab Islamic conquest, most likely in the middle of the sixth century. Ibn Kabar (14th c.) states that the Theotokia for the Coptic month of Kiyakh were not used in Upper Egypt, but were passed around among the churches of Misr, Cairo, and the northern part of the country.² This variability may have been the result of added disputes and pressure in Alexandria and Lower Egypt related to the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, 451, that may not have been as prominent in the South.

Another prayer that appears to be unique to the Coptic Orthodox tradition is the prayer recited prior to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The words of this prayer are:

We exalt you, the mother of the true Light. We glorify you, O saint and Mother of God, for you brought forth unto us the Savior of the whole world; He came and saved our souls. Glory to You, our Master, Our King, Christ, the pride of the Apostles, the crown of the martyrs, the joy of the righteous, the firmness of the churches, the forgiveness of sins. We proclaim the Holy Trinity in one Godhead. We worship Him. We glorify Him. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord bless. Amen.³

Modern popular opinion has attested the authorship of this prayer to St. Cyril of Alexandria or the Council of Ephesus, 431, but the extant writings of St. Cyril and the minutes and documents

² Ragheb Moftah, Marian Robertson, Martha Roy, Margit Toth, “Coptic Music: Description of the Corpus and Present Musical Practice,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz Ateya (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1991), 6:1726–27.

³ A portion of this prayer was written on the icon of St. Cyril of Alexandria and Pope Celestine that was presented to Pope Francis on Thursday, June 23, 2022, during the eighteenth plenary meeting of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in Rome.

of this council do not support this notion. Furthermore, if this prayer was the result of a conciliar document or decree or of such a prominent Church father, one might expect a more widespread usage rather than its limited use solely in the Church of Egypt.

The third group of prayers are the troparia in the Coptic Agpeya. In each of the canonical hours, there are a set of three or six troparia that follow a passage from the Gospels. Every third troparion (third and sixth) is directed towards the Holy Virgin Mary. In the Eastern Orthodox Churches, this troparion dedicated to the Mother of God is called a Theotokion, but the Theotokion in the Coptic Orthodox rite is the metrical hymn of multiple stanzas that is chanted antiphonally in the Coptic Psalmody as discussed above.

III. FEASTS AND FASTS

The Coptic Orthodox menologies and synaxarium contain many feasts and fasts associated with the Virgin Mary.⁴ These can be categorized into four basic groups. The first group and probably the earliest of Marian feasts and fasts are those events in which the Virgin Mary was involved that were primarily Lord's feasts related to the Incarnation of the Word and the fulfilling of the divine economy. The second group contains events in the life of the Virgin Mary and her parents, Joachim and Anna. The third category includes commemorations of the building and consecration of some ancient churches and monasteries named after the Virgin Mary. The last category of commemorations is those of Marian apparitions in Egypt. Since there are numerous Marian feasts and many are shared among the Roman Catholic, Eastern

⁴ The details of the feasts and fasts associated with the Virgin Mary are in large part taken from Shenouda Ishak, *Studies in the Synaxarium according to the Order of the Coptic Orthodox Church: Feasts of the Mother of God, Saint Mary the Virgin and her Parents*, vol. 3 (Arabic) (Cairo, Egypt: Al-Nubar, 2020). The two main published manuscript editions of the Coptic synaxarium utilized were *Le synaxaire arabe jacobite*, trans. R. Basset, Patrologia orientalis (PO) 1, 3, 11, 16, 17 (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1907-23); *Synaxarium Alexandrinum*, trans. J. Forget, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (CSCO), 47, 48, 49, 67, 78 and 90 (Beryti: E Typographeo Catholico, 1905-26). The Coptic menologies from the available thirteenth century manuscripts are in *Les Ménologes des évangéliaires coptes-arabes*, ed. & trans. F. Nau, PO 10.2 (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1913).

Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the following descriptions will focus mainly on the practices that may have distinct features in the Coptic Orthodox liturgical tradition.

III.1. Marian Feasts Related to the Incarnation of the Word

Of course, there are several direct quotes of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament in addition to the many stories in which she is involved or at least mentioned. Throughout the liturgical year, many of these passages are read in the Coptic lectionary. But among the commemorations in the liturgical year that are feasts of the Lord, four are also considered to be Marian feasts: the Annunciation, Nativity, the Presentation to the Temple, and the Flight to Egypt. This category probably includes the earliest feasts to be considered Marian. In current practice, the feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on 29 Baramhat (March 25, Julian calendar; April 7, Gregorian calendar), nine months prior to the Feast of the Nativity which is celebrated on 29 Kiyahk (December 25, Julian; January 7, Gregorian).⁵ The Annunciation feast almost always occurs during the Lenten period and rarely during Holy Week. According to the Coptic rite, if it occurs during Great Lent, it is celebrated with all of the festal rites and hymns, but it does not break the fast either in diet or in abstinence.⁶ Thus, if the feast is on any of the days of the week except Saturday or Sunday, the divine liturgy is to be celebrated later in the afternoon to preserve the abstinence appropriate to the rites of Great Lent. If the Annunciation feast occurs during Holy Week, the rites of Holy Week take precedence and the feast is not observed.

The Annunciation is also commemorated on the second Sunday of the Coptic month of Kiyahk during the Advent fast but with the rites associated with that fasting period. In fact, all of

⁵ In its earliest practice, the Feast of the Annunciation was on 7 Barmudah (April 2, Julian). This is most likely because prior to the early fifth century, the Church of Egypt did not have separate celebrations for the Nativity and the Baptism (Epiphany) of our Lord, but a single feast of the Epiphany or Divine Manifestation on 11 Tubah (January 6, Julian).

⁶ Cf. *Tartīb al-Bī'ah*; Ibn Kabar, *Miṣbāh al-zulma*, 19; Ibn Sibā^c. *Pretiosa Margarita*, 99.

Advent and especially the Coptic month of Kiyahk (called the Marian month) which is included within the period of Advent, is a liturgical season that has many unique rites, hymns, readings, and prayers related to the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, because this fast is focused on the Incarnation of the Word. There is evidence from as early as the seventh century of this fast being practiced during the time of Pope Anastasius, the 36th Pope of Alexandria (605–16),⁷ but the details of the dates of this fast are first manifest in the canons of Pope Christodoulos, the 66th Pope of Alexandria (1047–77). Canon 15 states: “Likewise the Fast of the Holy Nativity shall be from the Feast of St. Menas, i.e., the fifteenth day of Hatur to the twenty-ninth day of Kiyahk.” Clearly, these dates are not inclusive in the fast because 29 Kiyahk is the feast of the Nativity. So, the Advent fast begins on 16 Hatur (November 25, Gregorian; November 12, Julian) and ends on 28 Kiyahk (January 6, Gregorian; December 24, Julian) which is the Paramun fast for the feast of the Nativity. The reason for these dates is not entirely clear, but they seem to be comparable to the dates for the Advent fast in the West as described by Gregory of Tours (536–94) in his *History of the Franks*⁸ and canon 9 of the Council of Macon (581). Interestingly, Ibn Sibā^c (13th c.) gives a unique interpretation of the reason behind this fast that the Virgin Mary, when Joseph thought of putting her away (Mat 1:19) after seeing that she was pregnant, began fasting until the birth of our Lord. Therefore, we fast in imitation of the Blessed Virgin who fasted from the seventh and a half month of her pregnancy until childbirth by reason of the fear that she had of Joseph.⁹

The feast of the Nativity, which is celebrated from 28 Kiyahk (Paramun fast), through 29 Kiyahk to 30 Kiyahk (second day of the Feast), focuses primarily on the Incarnation and the

⁷ Severus ibn al-Muqaffa, Bishop of el-Ashmunein, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, trans. B. Everts. Patrologia orientalis (PO) 1 (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1904), 483.

⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, book 2.

⁹ Ibn Sibā^c, *Pretiosa Margarita*, 32.

birth of Christ, but the liturgical scriptural readings and hymns also include veneration of the Theotokos. Some of these hymns include elements found in sources other than the Holy Scriptures such as the *Protevangelium* of James where for example, Salome, the midwife, is mentioned, or that a great light had shown in the cave when Christ was born. Also, it should be noted that the Gospel passage of the birth of Christ (Lk 2:1–30) is read during the liturgy of the Paramun, but the Gospel passage read during the liturgy of the feast itself is that of the visitation of the Magi (Mat 2:1–12).

The feast of the Presentation to the Temple, again, is primarily a Lord's feast. However, it is also considered a Marian feast because of her purification according to the law of Moses.¹⁰ Concerning its ritual practice in the Coptic Orthodox Church, it is celebrated on 8 Amshir (February 2, Julian; February 15, Gregorian), forty days after the feast of the Nativity.¹¹

Lastly, the feast of the Lord's Entry to Egypt is a Lord's feast that is unique to the liturgical practice of the Church of Egypt. It is celebrated on 24 Bashans (June 1, Gregorian). Because the flight to Egypt included the Holy Family, this is also a Marian feast. Isaiah 19 gives a prophecy of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt where it is stated: “Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst” (Is 19:1). St. Cyril of Alexandria interprets the “swift cloud” (or “light cloud”) as either the “holy flesh of the Lord” or as the Virgin Mary, an understanding that has been incorporated into the Wednesday Theotokion. Thus he writes:

What is meant by the Lord appearing on a light cloud? Come now, let us explain as far as possible. Some of the commentators claimed that the light cloud is the holy flesh of the Lord, that is the temple taken from the virgin, and they compare it to a cloud because of its being liberated from earthly movements and desires and, as it were, raised aloft. After

¹⁰ The theological significance of this feast concerning the Virgin Mary will be discussed later in this paper.

¹¹ Prior to the separate celebration of Christ's Nativity from the Epiphany, this feast was celebrated on 20 Amshir, forty days from 11 Tubah, the date of the original feast and further designated the end of the quadragesimal fast of Lent at the time when it had not yet been connected with the Paschal Feast.

all, the holy body of Christ the savior of us all is really pure and rid of all earthly uncleanness. Others in turn by contrast presume that the holy Virgin is referred to by the light cloud. In my view, perhaps the range of both views is suggested to us in saying he is seated on a light cloud...¹²

Egypt was the only other land besides the lands of modern-day Israel that Christ entered. His presence in Egypt, although special to the Egyptians, is considered to be an expression of love and acceptance to the Gentiles, in general, that they have a part in the salvation that He came to fulfill. Thus, even though this feast is a liturgical practice in the Coptic Orthodox tradition, it is considered a feast for all Christians.

It should be noted that the Gospel passages for the various liturgical services in the Advent fast and these four feasts include the entirety of the first two chapters of both the Gospels of Ss. Matthew and Luke, the genealogy in Luke 3:23–38, as well as John 1:1–17.

III.2. Life Events of the Virgin Mary

Besides the Lord’s feasts that are also considered Marian feasts, there are several other commemorations in the Coptic menologies and synaxarium for the various different stages in the life of the Virgin Mary beginning with the annunciation of her birth until her dormition and the translation of her body. The majority of these commemorations can be traced back to no later than the sixth century, but there is evidence for a liturgical commemoration for the Virgin Mary in Egypt beginning no later than the fourth century, although without specific details. St. Athanasius of Alexandria speaks of keeping her “memory” or “commemoration” (*mnēmē*) in two of his letters which most likely referred to a liturgical practice.¹³ Furthermore, the Anaphora of

¹² Cyril, *In Isaiam* 2.4 (PG 70.452), trans. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 3 vols., trans. Robert Charles Hill (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 2:42

¹³ Athanasius, *Letter to Epictetus* 4 (PG 26.1056–57); *Letter to Maximus the Philosopher* 3 (PG 26.1088).

Egyptian Basil, dated to the early fourth century, includes a commemoration of the Theotokos. It states:

Since, Master, it is a command of your only-begotten Son that we should share in the commemoration of your saints, vouchsafe to remember, Lord, those of our fathers who have been pleasing to you from eternity: patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, preachers, evangelists, and all the righteous perfected in faith; especially at all times the holy and glorious Mary, Mother of God (Theotokos); and by her prayers have mercy on us all, and save us through your holy name which has been invoked upon us.¹⁴

Both of these fourth-century sources further indicate an even earlier beginning to the commemoration and veneration of the Virgin Mary in liturgical practice. This is not surprising given that the relics of martyrs were being preserved and venerated in the churches and the believers' homes and their yearly commemorations on the day of their martyrdom was already being practiced no later than two centuries prior.¹⁵ If this was the practice with the martyrs, the liturgical commemoration and veneration of the Virgin Mary would not only be probable, but also expected, especially in Egypt.

The earliest stage in the life of the Virgin Mary that is commemorated is the annunciation of her birth to her parents, Ss. Joachim and Anna, on 7 Mesore. Both of her parents also have commemorations in the Coptic calendar on the days of their departure: Joachim on 7 Barmuda and Anna on 11 Hatur (which is a monthly feast in Ethiopia and Eritrea for St. Anna). Nine months from 7 Mesore (July 31, Julian), taking into account the intercalary days of the Coptic calendar, is 1 Bashans (April 26, Julian), the commemoration of the Virgin Mary's birth.¹⁶ These dates for these commemorations are particular to the Coptic tradition. However, there are also other dates in the Coptic tradition for these same commemorations that coincide with the

¹⁴ English translation in Maxwell Johnson, “*Sub Tuum Praesidium: The Theotokos in Christian Life and Worship before Ephesus*,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 1 (2008), 56.

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 18.

¹⁶ The commemorations of saints are typically on the day of their departure. However, there are a select group of saints for whom their births are also commemorated, among whom are the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist because of their unique status among the saints and the extraordinary circumstances surrounding their births.

menologies of other Churches. This second set of dates, 13 Kiyahk (December 9, Julian) for the annunciation of her birth, and 10 Tut (September 7, Julian) for her birth, are the older and probably original commemorations. The dates were altered most likely because 1 Bashans was a popular Pharaonic feast of the harvest attributed to the ancient Egyptian goddess Renenutet, also known as Ernutet or Thermuthis. Ernutet is often portrayed with her son Nabris while nursing him, similar to a common depiction of Isis and Horus. The intention behind this modification appears to be the substitution of this popular Pharaonic feast with the veneration of the Theotokos.¹⁷ In fact, a well-known Coptic icon of the Virgin Mary, the galaktotrophousa in which she is nursing the Christ child, may be a counterpart to the image of Ernutet or Isis nursing their children.¹⁸

¹⁷ The dates for several feasts and commemorations in the Coptic Orthodox calendar were chosen to substitute some of the celebrations related to the ancient Egyptian religious festivals with a Christian feast because of their popularity. For example, 12 Baouna, the main feast for the Archangel Michael, was previously a festival for the Isis whose tears were believed to cause the inundation of the Nile. Also, the three days of the Feast of the Cross (17 to 19 Tut) were ancient Egyptian feasts for the dead. Of note, there was a monastery in Nahia near Giza consecrated on 1 Bashans after the Virgin Mary.

¹⁸ There are several theories as to the significance and interpretation of the galaktotrophousa icon. Cf., e.g., John A. McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary and Inter-Religious Contexts in the Fifth-Century Church,” in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London and New York: Burns and Oates, 2008), 1–22; Elizabeth S. Bolman, “The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt” in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 13–22.



Next is the commemoration of the Virgin Mary's entrance to the temple at the age of three years on 3 Kiyahk (November 30, Julian) which is also a monthly feast on the third of every month in Ethiopia and Eritrea. She was offered to the Lord because of the vow her mother, St. Anna, had made when she was supplicating the Lord for a child. When she could no longer stay in the temple at the age of twelve years, the lot fell upon St. Joseph to take her and live with him as his betrothed. In the Coptic tradition, St. Joseph was an elderly man at the age of 90 years when this had happened.¹⁹ Therefore, traditional Coptic iconography depicts him as an elder with white hair as opposed to more modern depictions of him as a young or middle-aged man. This is an important feature of this icon as it is not only consistent with the tradition received but it also preserves the teaching of both the Virgin birth as well as the Virgin Mary's perpetual virginity.

¹⁹ Cf., e.g., *History of Joseph the Carpenter* in ANF 8.388–94.

After the birth of Christ and the visitation of the Magi, Joseph was warned in a dream to take the young Child and His mother and flee to Egypt (Mat 2:13). The presence of the Holy Family in Egypt for three and a half years²⁰ was monumental and foundational for Christianity in Egypt. Many of the stations and places where they resided became holy sites that contain churches and monasteries named after the Virgin Mary and other saints where numerous people go for worship and pilgrimage. The traditions of certain occurrences in these various holy sites have become incorporated into the liturgical commemorations and veneration of the Virgin Mary in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Given this extensive impact, the discussion here will be limited to the commemorations in the Coptic menologies and synaxarium.²¹

On 25 Bashans (June 2, Gregorian) there is a commemoration of the coming of the Holy Family to Dair al Garnous in Maghagha province, Menia Governorate, on the way to al-Ashmunein (Hermopolis) in modern-day Mallawi. The site is called in Coptic “Bay Ḥsūs” meaning “House of Jesus.” Tradition states that Christ dug a well and blessed the waters there which became healing for any malady. When a church was built at that site, this well became a measure for the rising of the Nile. On the day of this commemoration, as is well-documented over the centuries, the waters would rise at the reading of the liturgy Gospel passage. The extent to which the waters rose (for that day only) would mark the extent of the inundation of the Nile for that year.

Also, on 7 Barmuda (April 2, Julian) there is a commemoration of the Holy Family taking up residence in Mount Qusqam, the place of the current Dair al-Muharraq named after the Virgin Mary. They built a small residence and stayed there for six months until the angel appeared to Joseph and told him that Herod was dead and that they should return to the land of

²⁰ Cf. Rev 12:14; Dn 7:25; 12:7.

²¹ Further details of the Holy Family’s movements throughout Egypt are given primarily in the *Vision of Theophilus* as well as other later sources.

Israel (Mat 2:15, 19–21). This latter appearance of the angel to Joseph after those six months is another commemoration on 6 Babah (October 3, Julian).

Lastly, the dormition and the translation of the Virgin Mary's body have the prime status among her liturgical commemorations. Her dormition is commemorated on 21 Tubah (January 16, Julian) and thus there is a monthly commemoration for the Virgin Mary on the twenty-first of every Coptic month. This commemoration appears in earlier sources than that of the translation of her body on 16 Mesore (August 9, Julian). The length of time between the two dates is attested to in some of the accounts of her departure and burial at which time Christ had instructed the apostles that they would see her again after 206 days. In some of the earlier Coptic sources, the assumption feast is both a commemoration of the revealing to the apostles of the translation of her body as well as the actual day on which her body was translated to Paradise where it remains under the tree of life until the general resurrection of the dead. None of the commemorations of the Virgin Mary break the Wednesday and Friday fast. The rite in the Coptic Orthodox Church is that the feast of a saint and even most of the Lord's feasts do not break a fast other than the feasts of the Lord's Nativity, Epiphany, and the Pentecost season. For all other feasts and commemorations, if they fall on a Wednesday or Friday, the fast is preserved.

Even though the dormition feast appears to be an older liturgical commemoration, greater popular attention is given to the latter which is preceded by a fasting period that starts on 1 Mesore. The reason for the length of this fast is unclear, but from its earliest documentation in the 10th century, it was called only a “fast of the virgins” without a specific association to the Virgin Mary or a general fast practiced by all of the faithful. The first mention of it as a “fast for the Virgin” is in the 13th century, however, it was stated that most who observed the fast were ascetics and nuns. Ibn Kabar (14th c.) appears to be the first who connects this fast with a

tradition that the apostles fasted this period of time until God had revealed the status of the Virgin Mary's body. Because of popular piety, love for the Virgin Mary in Egypt, and some harsh circumstances endured by the Copts, over the subsequent centuries the fast was observed by all of the faithful.²²

III.3. Consecration of Churches

The consecration of several churches in the name of the Virgin Mary have designated commemorations. The most popular of these commemorations is the consecration of the ancient church for the Virgin Mary in Dair al Muharraq on 6 Hatur. This is considered to be the oldest church in Egypt and tradition states that the altar in that church is the stone on which our Lord sat.²³ The prophecy of Isaiah 19:19–21 states: “In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the Lord because of the oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Mighty One, and He will deliver them. Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering; yes, they will make a vow to the Lord and perform it.” The prophecy has been interpreted both spiritually and literally. The spiritual interpretation is that the “altar in the midst of the land of Egypt” is the Church of Egypt in general and the “pillar to the Lord at its border” as the See of Alexandria. However, a literal interpretation has also been

²² In fact, many Copts, especially women, take this fast more seriously than most of the other church fasts. Given its timing in August, the churches, especially those named after the Virgin Mary and special pilgrimage sites related to the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt or apparitions of the Virgin Mary, have daily liturgies, vigils, preaching, and hymns for the veneration of the Virgin Mary.

²³ Until today, it is the practice in Dair al Muharraq that the entire divine liturgy celebrated at that altar is to be prayed entirely in the Coptic language. -

given that the “altar” is this physical altar in Dair al Muharraq which is geographically in the center of Egypt.

According to the *Vision of Theophilus*, Pope Theophilus, the twenty-third Pope of Alexandria, went to take the blessing of that place and pray a liturgy there and approximately 300 monks in that community attended. He had intended on consecrating that place and building a church, and he prayed (in that place) that God might reveal to him the different stations where the Holy Family stayed in Egypt. The Virgin Mary appeared to him in great luminous glory and explained these details to him. She also gave him the details of the consecration of the church by the hand of Christ Himself in the name of the Virgin Mary. 6 Hatur is a monthly feast in Ethiopia and Eritrea and Dair al Muharraq is a popular pilgrimage site for Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox both on this feast as well as for those travelling to the Holy Lands towards the end of their lives.²⁴ There are several other notable commemorations of church consecrations in the name of the Virgin Mary throughout the liturgical year.²⁵

III.4. Marian Apparitions

Apparitions for the Virgin Mary are not only a modern claim or phenomenon. The earliest reference to a Marian apparition is from St. Gregory of Nyssa who states that the Virgin

²⁴ There is also a tradition in Ethiopia of a forty-day fast prior to this feast that is observed by the clergy.

²⁵ E.g., 1) the first church built in the name of the Virgin Mary in Philippi during apostolic times as well as the church for the Virgin Mary in Athribis (now Tell Atrib, Qalyubia), the second or third church in Egypt which was notable for its size, glorious ornamentation, and the many miracles that are attested to there are both commemorated on 21 Baouna; 2) the house of St. Wadamon (Eudamon) al-Armanti (whose martyrdom is commemorated on 18 Mesore) was consecrated as a church in the name of the Virgin Mary and her Son in Armant, Luxor, as promised to him by our Lord as a child in Egypt after Wadamon became the first martyr in Upper Egypt; 3) the church at the site of the Virgin Mary’s tomb in Jerusalem built by Constantine and his sons and where Juvenal was opposed by the people and clergy of Jerusalem after he accepted the Council of Chalcedon has a commemoration on 21 Tubah, on the same day as her dormition; 4) a church was consecrated in “al-Mahamma” in modern-day al-Ismaliya, where the Holy Family stopped on their return back to Israel; 5) 2 Tubah is the commemoration of the consecration of the Virgin Mary’s church in Old Cairo next to the church of Abba Shenouda c. 9th century after it was rebuilt during the time of Caliph al-Abbas Harun al-Rashid when destroyed by the previous caliph. This church is popularly known as “al-Damshiriya” after it was restored and renovated in the 18th c. by someone from the city of Damshir, Menia Governorate.

Mary with St. John the Evangelist appeared to St. Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. 213–70) and St. John explained the true faith to him.²⁶

There are similar attestations in the history of the Church of Egypt. On 21 Bashans, the monthly commemoration of the Virgin Mary, people would visit Dayr al-Maghtis on the shores of Lake Burullus, Kafr al-Sheikh Governorate, a place believed to be related to where the Holy Family visited because of the regular apparitions of the Virgin Mary on this day. This site is also known as “Biḥa Ḥaṣūs” due to the tradition that the Christ child left his footprint in a stone there. Pilgrims from the south would visit this site on their way to the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem on this day because of these apparitions.²⁷

Also, the account of Anba Abraham ibn Zara, the 62nd Pope of Alexandria (975–78; commemoration 6 Kiyahk), and the moving of Muqattam mountain includes an apparition of the Virgin Mary to the Pope. When the Fatimid Caliph Abū Tamīm Ma‘ad al-Mu‘izz li-Dīn Allāh threatened to abolish the Christians of Egypt if they were unable to fulfill the teaching of Christ: “for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Mat 17:20), the Pope had requested three days in order to accomplish this task. A general fast was proclaimed and on the dawn of the third day, the Virgin Mary appeared to Pope Abraham and directed him to Simon the Cobbler, a one-eyed faithful Christian, through whose faith the mountain would be moved.²⁸

In recent decades there have been several Marian apparitions that have been validated by the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church and attested to by millions of Egyptians, both

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus*, eds. Gunterus Heil, Johannes P. Cavarnos, and Otto Lendle. *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*. Vol. 10.1, *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones, Pars II* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).

²⁷ This holy site was destroyed in 1438 AD.

²⁸ The full account of this miraculous event is found in Severus ibn al-Muqaffa, *History of the Patriarch* 6, 137–46, under the biography of Anba Abraham the Syrian.

Christians and non-Christians. Yearly commemorations have been established either generally in the Coptic Orthodox Church or locally in the areas and churches where these apparitions happened.²⁹ The first, most evident, and most popular of these apparitions that has entered the Coptic synaxarium began to occur on 24 Baramhat (April 2, 1968) on the Church of the Virgin Mary in Zeitun, Cairo, Egypt, and continued intermittently (at times several times a week) for a period of two years. Often a flock of illuminated doves, crosses, and the smell of incense, accompanied the presence of the Virgin Mary who was seen either walking around the domes on the roof of the church or kneeling before the mounted crosses.³⁰

Each of these apparitions occurred around the time of some turmoil or persecution among the Copts in Egypt. For example, the Marian apparitions in Zeitun occurred after the rapid defeat of Egypt in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and strained relations between the government and the Coptic population. Also, the apparition in Edfu in 1982 was felt to be associated with the difficult circumstances after His Holiness Pope Shenouda III was put under house arrest and many bishops and priests were arrested. These apparitions of the Holy Mother of God were interpreted as her providing comfort and support to her children in their times of need.

IV. THEOLOGICAL THEMES

There are five general theological themes that permeate the veneration of the Virgin Mary in the Coptic Orthodox liturgical tradition and are accompanied by scriptural prophecies

²⁹ Besides the Marian apparitions in Zeitun, other validated apparitions include the Church of the Virgin Mary in Edfu (15 Mesore; August 21, 1982), the Church of St. Demiana in Babadoblu, Shoubra (16 Baramhat; March 25, 1986), the Church of St. Mark in Asyut (12 Mesore; August 18, 2000), and the Church of the Virgin Mary and Archangel Michael in Al-Warraq, Giza (1 Kiyahk; December 10, 2009).

³⁰ There have been multiple newspaper articles, books, scientific studies, and documentaries distributed about the Marian apparitions in Zeitun. It is alleged that the President Gamal Abdel Nasser saw this apparition himself and that this event was a turning point that improved his relations with Pope Cyril VI and the Copts in Egypt.

and an array of Old Testament typology. These five categories are that she is Theotokos, the Virgin birth, her perpetual virginity, her purity, and her intercession.

IV.1. Theotokos

The title of Theotokos (“God-bearer”) is used abundantly throughout the hymns, praises, and liturgical prayers of the Coptic Orthodox Church along with its Coptic equivalents, ΜΑCΝΟΥF (lit. “God-bearer” and the more precise counterpart) and ΘΜΔΥ ΜΦΝΟΥF (lit. “Mother of God”). Besides its presence in the Anaphora of Egyptian Basil quoted earlier, the repeated application of this title throughout the liturgical tradition is in large part the result of its well-founded utility in numerous patristic sources as they were expressing their Incarnational theology and also in veneration of the Virgin Mary. The term is found as early as the third century and no later than the fourth in Alexandria, long before the Nestorian controversy and the Council of Ephesus, 431, when this title came to the forefront of the debates concerning the nature of Christ. In that council, the title was ecumenically affirmed for the Virgin Mary as doctrinal to confirm the proper understanding of the Incarnation of the Word. The earliest usage is attributed to Origen in his *Commentary on Romans* by Socrates Scholasticus.³¹ The first clear documentation is in Pope Alexander of Alexandria in his encyclical c. 319 to Alexander of Constantinople concerning the heresy of Arius where he writes that Christ “bore a body not in appearance but in truth, derived

³¹ “Origen, ... in the first volume of his Commentaries on the apostle's epistle to the Romans, gives an ample exposition of the sense in which the term Theotokos is used. It is therefore obvious that Nestorius had very little acquaintance with the treatises of the ancients, and for that reason . . . objected to the word only; for that he does not assert Christ to be a mere man, as Photinus did or Paul of Samosata, his own published homilies fully demonstrate” (Socrates, *HE* 7.32, trans. in NPNF, 2nd series, 2:171). Unfortunately, the remaining Latin translation from the original Greek does not have this term (*Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 1–5*, trans. Thomas Scheck [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001], 17n73). There are five other possible references in Origen's other writings (cf. Johnson, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, 58). It may also be found “in a lost treatise of Pierius (+309) called *Περί τῆς θεοτόκου*, and in a fragment attributed to Peter of Alexandria” (Johnson, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, 56 & n13, 14).

from Mary the Mother of God [έκ τῆς θεοτόκου Μαρίας].”³² Pope Athanasius of Alexandria continues this usage of Theotokos for the Virgin Mary multiple times in several of his writings including *On the Incarnation*, *Against the Arians*, *Life of Antony*, and his *Letter to the Virgins*.

St. Cyril of Alexandria champions this term, especially during the Nestorian controversy along with several other Church fathers at that time. The scope of this paper will not allow an exposition on the role of the title Theotokos during this phase of Christian history, but suffice it to quote the first of the twelve anathemas that were appended to the Third Letter of St. Cyril to Nestorius, the Synodal Letter, that was read and ecumenically approved in the Council of Ephesus, 431. It states:

If anyone does not confess the Emmanuel to be truly God, and hence the holy virgin to be Mother of God (Theotokos) (for she gave birth in the flesh to the Word of God made flesh), let him be anathema.³³

St. Cyril explains the significance of this title because of its relationship to a proper understanding of the nature of Christ and its impact on the salvation of humanity. In the *Third Letter to Nestorius*, he writes:

Since the holy virgin gave birth in the flesh to God hypostatically united to flesh, for this reason we say that she is the “Mother of God.” This does not mean that the Word’s nature took the beginning of its existence from the flesh, for he “was in the beginning” and “the Word was God, and the Word was with God” (Jn 1:1) and he is the maker of the ages, coeternal with the Father and maker of all things. As we have said before, it means rather that he hypostatically united the human condition to himself and underwent a fleshly birth from her womb. He had no natural need, or external necessity, of a temporal birth in these last times of this age, but he did this so that he might bless the very beginning of our own coming into being, and that since a woman had given birth to him as united to the flesh, from that point onwards the curse upon our whole race should cease that drives our earthly bodies to death. He did it to annul that sentence: “In sorrow shall you bring forth children (Gen 3:16), and also to demonstrate the truth of the prophet’s words:

³² PG 18:568, trans. in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 237.

³³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, trans. in John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 273.

“Death swallowed us up in its power, but God wiped every tear from every face” (Is 25:8 LXX).³⁴

Throughout both Egyptian and other patristic writings, the belief of the Virgin Mary as Theotokos is confirmed by a host of biblical typology, imagery, analogies, and metaphors that were incorporated into the Coptic Orthodox liturgical tradition. To name just a few, she is spoken of as Jacob’s ladder and the gate of heaven, the burning bush, Mount Sinai, the tabernacle (cf. Jn 1:14), the ark of the covenant, the lampstand, the golden manna pot, and the throne of God carried by the cherubim. Originally, these types were used to refer to the Incarnation and Christ personally. However, because the Word took flesh from the Virgin Mary and became united with human nature from her, the typology eventually extended to her, especially during the period of the Nestorian heresy and afterwards when Christology came to the forefront of theological discussions and debates. In fact, many of the titles that are used for Christ such as “the light,” “salvation,” “mercy,” “life,” etc... are then taken and used in titles for the Virgin Mary. Thus, she is called not only “Mother of Christ” or “Mother of Emmanuel” but also “the Mother of the True Light,” “the Mother of Salvation,” “the Mother of Mercy,” etc... These titles are in no way intended to express a salvific role in the redemption of humanity for the Virgin Mary other than her role in the Incarnation. Rather, they are merely expressions of veneration and understanding of the Incarnation of the Word from her.

IV.2. The Virgin Birth

The teaching of the Virgin birth is expressed abundantly in the Coptic Orthodox liturgical tradition through the inclusion of biblical passages like Luke 1:25–37 from the annunciation and

³⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius* 11, trans. McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 273. It should be noted in this passage as well as in the fourth anathema that St. Cyril is affirming both the hypostatic and natural union which is the reason that the Virgin Mary is Theotokos.

Matthew 1:18–23 about St. Joseph’s concern after finding her pregnant in the liturgical readings at various times in the year, especially during Advent and the feast of the Nativity. Just as with Theotokos, there are several biblical types, analogies, and metaphors that are used to express the doctrine of the Virgin birth. For example, the burning bush is interpreted not only as a type of the Word taking flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, but also the preservation of her virginity through the virginal conception and birth as shown by the bush not burned by the fire. This is expressed in the first part of the Thursday Theotokion in the Coptic psalmody that states:

The bush that Moses saw in the wilderness — the fire burning in it, but its branches were not burned — is a type of Mary, the undefiled Virgin, which the Word of the Father, came and took flesh in her. The fire of His divinity did not burn the womb of the Virgin, and after she gave birth to Him, she remained a virgin.

Similar types that are used liturgically are those of Aaron’s rod which budded without planting or watering (Num 17:1–10) and the stone cut from the mountain without human hands in Daniel’s recounting of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dn 2:34–35, 44–45).

As demonstrated in the liturgical practice of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the biblical teaching and doctrine of the Virgin birth is as equally fundamental as the title of Theotokos. And just as with the defense of Theotokos, the defense of the Virgin birth is not only in veneration of the Virgin Mary, but more so as a defense of the impeccability of Christ for the salvation of humanity under sin. As a brief summary of the Egyptian patristic and liturgical expression of this doctrine, because of the Virgin birth Christ’s humanity was not afflicted with the disease of sin as Adam was through his sin and all of humanity along with him. One of the reasons that Christ is impeccable apart from being God Incarnate is because he was not conceived through the natural act of procreation, but by the Holy Spirit without the seed of man. Although marriage and procreation were honorable, the sinful passions that entered human nature through Adam and Eve’s sin led to fleshly sensuality and concupiscence which propagated the diseased and sinful

human nature from one generation to the next through sexual intercourse. However, Christ, the second Adam was born from a virgin without a diseased and sinful nature. Therefore, the Virgin birth was perceived as an essential step in the divine economy for salvation and not solely a unique miracle that fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 or only distinguished the Incarnation of the Word from all other human beings. It was necessary for humanity's redemption that the second Adam be impeccable to heal humanity from its inherent sinfulness as the result of being in the first Adam as well as personal sins.

Christ's impeccability and being incapable of sin is associated with the reason that His presentation to the temple is also considered to be a Marian feast. Part of the sacrifice that was offered for the purification of the mother after the birth of a child was a sin offering. However, there was no impurity associated with the conception and birth of Christ because His conception was by the Holy Spirit and not by a male's seed and the Holy Spirit sanctified her womb at the time of the Incarnation. Thus, she offered the sacrifice as a fulfillment of the law, but she was not in need of purification. Hesychius of Jerusalem (d. after 451), who was well-acquainted with the Alexandrian tradition, in one of his sermons on the feast of the Presentation to the Temple states:

"And when their days of purification were fulfilled, according to the law of Moses" (Lk 2:22). Who is "they"? For on the one hand Joseph was neither father, nor under liability for purifications, but neither was Mary nor the child in need of purifications. For thus it was written, "If ever a woman should conceive and bear a son, she shall be impure for seven days" (Lev 12:2). But Mary did not conceive from [human] seed; therefore she was not in need of purifications. "If ever a woman should conceive and bear a son, she shall be impure for seven days." Why? Because she introduced a second Adam into life... The woman was Theotokos, but she did not suffer the things of women. For the womb did not receive the seed of a man; the field of Mary did not behold a plow; the virginal vineyard did not submit to a mattock, so that the offering was not on his behalf, but on behalf of the entirety of our race.³⁵

³⁵ Hesychius of Jerusalem, *De Hypapante* I in Michel Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, 2 vols. (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 1:26–29.

Also, the Virgin birth is the reason that the Virgin Mary is described in the liturgical prayers and hymns as paradoxically both mother and virgin. She is also described as the second Eve and “the Mother of all the Living.”³⁶ Eve-Mary typology is certainly not foreign to patristic teaching as early as the second century in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon and continuing afterwards.³⁷ The comparison and contrast is comparable to Adam-Christ typology found in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45. For example, Eve is the “mother of the living” (Gen 3:20) physically, but she brought sin, death, and corruption, and these were propagated to her progeny. In contrast, the Virgin Mary gave birth to the One Who gives life to all flesh and restored humanity from sin, death, and corruption. Eve was disobedient (cf. Rom 5:19; Adam-Christ), but the Virgin Mary was obedient both to the angel at the annunciation, in her fulfillment of the law at the Lord’s presentation to the temple, and in her living a pure life. Eve was cursed, especially in childbirth, but the Virgin Mary is “full of grace” and “blessed among women” (Lk 1:28, 42).

IV.3. Perpetual Virginity

In the Coptic psalmody, the Virgin Mary is repeatedly described as **ETOI ΜΠΑΡΘΕΝΟC ΝCHOY ΝΙΒΕΝ**, literally “she who is virgin at all times” or “ever-Virgin.” This is the Coptic counterpart of the Greek **ἀειπάρθενος** found throughout the Egyptian Church fathers. In fact, the earliest documented use of the term is with Pope Peter of Alexandria who was martyred in 311.³⁸ Besides the types that are used to denote the Virgin conception and birth, one of the popular types that is further used to express the Virgin Mary’s perpetual virginity in the Coptic liturgical

³⁶ Tuesday Theotokion of Coptic psalmody, third section.

³⁷ E.g., Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.22.

³⁸ Peter of Alexandria, Fragment 7 in PG 18, 517B, trans. in Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (Repr. ed. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2009), 37.

tradition is the gate to the east in Ezekiel 44:2: “This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.”³⁹

The Virgin Mary’s perpetual virginity is vigorously defended in Egypt as early as the third century as evidenced in Origen’s *Commentary on John* when he writes: “There is no child of Mary except Jesus, according to the opinion of those who think correctly about her.”⁴⁰ He also writes in his *Commentary on Matthew* as follows:

Those who speak thus mean to safeguard Mary's dignity in the virginity she conserved until the end, so that that body chosen to serve the Word, who said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Lk 1:35), did not know any relations with a man, after the point that the Holy Spirit came down upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her. I consider it to be in conformity with reason that, with regard to the purity which consists in chastity, Jesus was the first among men, while Mary was the first among women. It is the act of a wicked man to attribute the first place in virginity to anyone else.⁴¹

IV.4. Purity

The Virgin Mary’s unique purity and life of holiness is attested to in the Coptic liturgical tradition. For example, in the Saturday Theotokion, she is described as ΤΑΤΕΩΛΕΒ ΝCΕΜΝΕ οὗτος εθογαβ ζεν σωβ ΝΙΒΕΝ, i.e., “the undefiled, chaste, and holy in everything.” This exclusive status led Pope Athanasius of Alexandria to speak of her as the highest moral example and image of holiness that Christians should seek to emulate. Thus he writes:

Mary was a pure virgin... She loved to do good works... She did not want to be seen by men but prayed God to be her judge... She remained at home always, leading a hidden life... She gave generously to the needy what surplus she had earned by the work of her hands... She prayed to God as one person speaks to another... Her speech was reflective and her voice subdued... She purposed to make some advances each day and did so...

³⁹ E.g., Wednesday Theotokion, first part. Cf., e.g., Cyril of Alexandria, *In Lucam* (PG 72.485).

⁴⁰ Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.4.

⁴¹ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17.

She did not worry about dying. She was even sad and sighed every day because she had not yet reached the gates of heaven... The Holy Scriptures, which instruct us, and the life of Mary, Mother of God, suffice as an ideal of perfection and the form of the heavenly.⁴²

Her extraordinary roles as mother, bride, virgin, daughter, queen, lady, and maidservant of the Lord all at once grant her an unprecedented status as the model of holiness for all Christians and in particular those leading a life of virginity and celibacy. Thus, she is also described in Coptic hymns and praises as “the pride of all virgins.”

Nevertheless, this sacred purity is understood in the Coptic tradition to relate to a life of purity and not at all related to Adam’s sin and the sinfulness of humanity. The greatest testimony to this notion is her own confession in the *Magnificat* when she states: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46–47). Her personal testimony of God as her Savior denotes that she is in need of salvation due to being in Adam by nature like the rest of humanity.

IV.5. Intercession

The last theme that is considered in this study of the liturgical practice in the veneration of the Virgin Mary is her intercession. The Coptic Orthodox liturgical prayers repeatedly and abundantly implore the Virgin Mary for her intercession before her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that He might have mercy on us, support us, forgive our sins, and share in the eternal inheritance with the saints. There is evidence for this practice in Egypt as early as the late third century in the *Sub tuum praesidium* papyrus, “Beneath your protection,” in the John Rylands library. The reconstruction of this manuscript states: “We take refuge beneath the protection of your compassion, Theotokos. Do not disregard our prayers in troubling times, but deliver us from

⁴² Athanasius, *First Letter to the Virgins*, quoted in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. by Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 104-5.

danger, O only pure and blessed one.”⁴³ The association of this prayer with liturgical practice at that time is unclear. Nevertheless, it at least indicates the belief in the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary on a personal or popular level. Further evidence is the Anaphora of Egyptian Basil from the early fourth century quoted above which is a clear indication of this liturgical practice.

St. Cyril of Alexandria considers the Virgin Mary to have an intercessory role in the wedding in Cana of Galilee. He writes:

2:4 “*Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.*” The Savior fashioned this excellent response for us as well. It was not right for him to come running to perform the deed or for him to come on his own volition as if to show off as a miracle worker. Instead, he needed to come to it reluctantly, because he was invited, and to indulge the need rather than the onlookers. The outcome of people’s desire seems more attractive somehow when it is not given at once to those who ask for it, but through a short delay they anticipate it more intensely. Both through this and in other ways, Christ shows that the honor that is due one’s parents is most remarkable, since he accepts out of reverence for his mother what he did not yet want to do. 2:5 *His mother said to the servants “Do whatever he tells you.”* The woman has great influence over the performance of the miracle, and she prevails by persuading the Lord with an appeal to propriety, since he is her son. She begins the work by preparing the servants of the feast to do whatever they are now instructed to do.⁴⁴

Here, St. Cyril indicates that her status as the Mother of Christ grants her a special intercessory role. Furthermore, her motherhood extends to all of the faithful, not only because she is the Mother of Christ, but also due to Christ’s words to her and to St. John the disciple while on the Cross (Jn 19:26–27). When our Lord told His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” and to St. John, “Behold your mother!” the whole Church was to take the Virgin Mary as its mother. This relationship feels even more special for Coptic Orthodox Christians because of the time she spent in Egypt and the many blessings that the Holy Family left there.

⁴³ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 69.

⁴⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *In Ioannem*, 2.1, trans. in Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Texts, trans. David R. Maxwell (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 1:90.

V. CONCLUSION

The veneration of the Virgin Mary in the Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical tradition extends far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this analysis should give some insight of the honor of the Virgin Mary in the hymns, praises, and prayers and their correlation with the testimony of the Holy Scriptures and the Egyptian Church fathers. Even though this veneration exceeds that of the heavenly hosts and the saints, there is a sense of balance that simultaneously provides the Church's affection and adoration of the Virgin Mary because of her role in the Incarnation and remembers her limitations as a human being in need of salvation as all others.

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