

The Coptic Church: *A Living Image*

Presented by:
St. Mary & Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church
Houston, Texas
www.stmaryhouston.org

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The Church was established when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in the upper room on the day of the Pentecost

The church accepted this gift from Christ, and though they were a small number, He promised them that they would preach His Name to the whole world:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Act 1:8)



The Church is composed of the Lord Christ (the Head) and the believers (the Body), and so, they carry His thoughts in their minds.

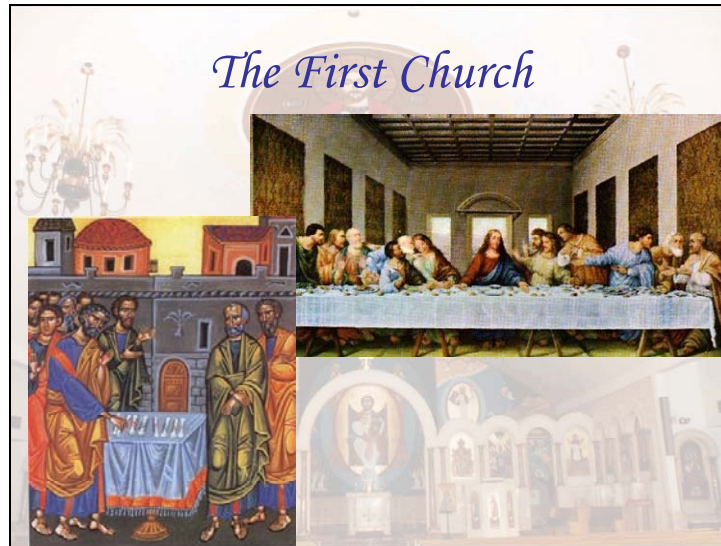
With this idea, the early church was able to build a church structure in any place, in order to build the Kingdom of God in the hearts of the believers.

The structure of the church is a visual message about the goal of the church: salvation. It portrays who the Lord Christ is, what is this Salvation, and how to obtain it.



In the very beginning, the church held its spiritual meetings (prayers of the hours) in the Jewish Temple, and in Jewish assemblies, which served to bring the Lord Christ to the Jews as well.
"Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." (Acts 3:1)

The services or "Divine Liturgies" were held in "upper rooms"



The first church was in the upper room of the Apostle St. Mark's mother, St. Mary.

Many important events took place there:

The Eucharist was established there at the Last Supper

The disciples gathered there in the evening of the day of Resurrection (Jn 20:19)

They gathered there on the following Sunday, when St. Thomas was with them (Jn 20:26)

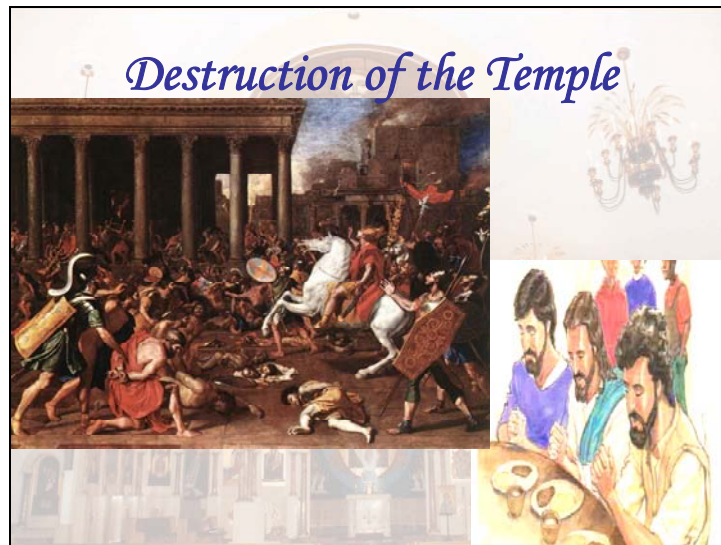
The disciples gathered there everyday after the Ascension, until the Holy Spirit descended upon them.

St. Matthias (pronounced "mu-THAI-uhs) the apostle who replaced Judas was chosen there (Acts 1:15)

There the Apostles gathered and prayed for St. Peter when he was in prison (Acts 12:12)

The seven deacons were ordained there (Acts 6:6)

The first church council was held there (Acts 15:4-6)



Prayer in the Temple started to decrease as a result of the Jews' persecution of the Christians, and it was completely halted with the destruction of the Temple in 68 A.D. Afterwards, believers started opening their homes (or parts of them) to the church to be used for prayers. Finally, separate buildings were established for church services and activities.



The church can be built in one of three shapes:

A Cross, A Circle, or an Ark.

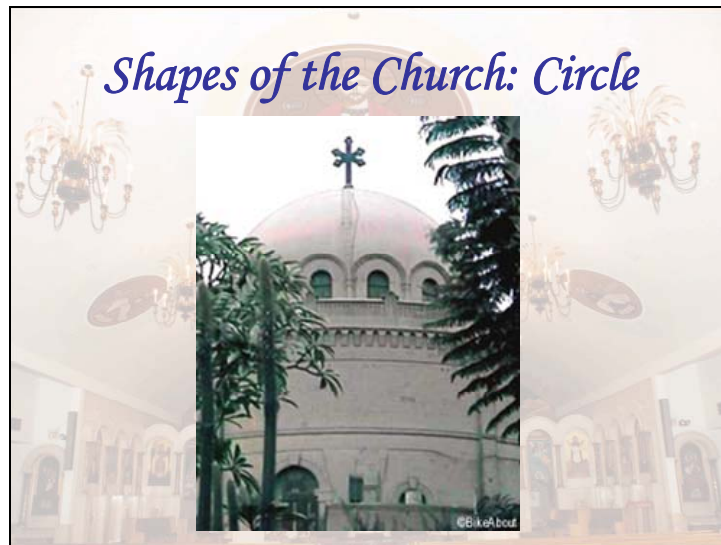
A Cross gives the true mysterious message of the church, that it is the crucified body of the Lord Christ.

To obtain the Kingdom of God, one must endure and be crucified with the Lord Christ

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18)

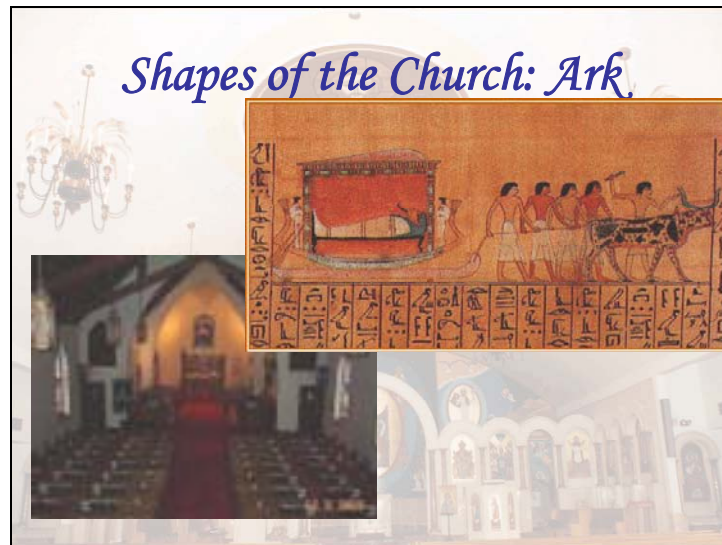
"...if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together." (Rom 8:17)

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A Circle is a line with has no beginning or end

It is infinite - Like God



In Ancient Religions :

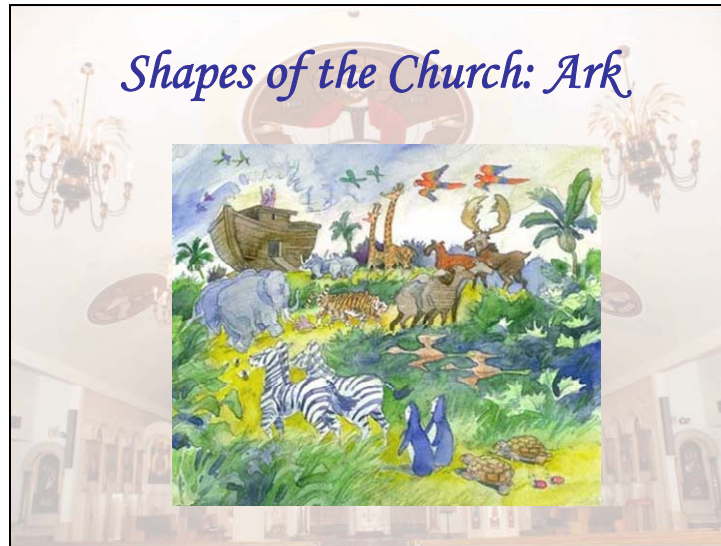
Ships were found drawn on the tombs on the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans.

They indicated that death was a happy voyage from this world to a better life

Death with the Lord Christ brings us to a better life - Eternal Life

A person who journeys from one place to another, travels in a ship

Christianity takes us from this world and transports us to a better life - Heaven



In the Old Testament: Noah's Ark saved Noah and his family from the flood
Whosoever remains inside the church is saved from the flood of the world

The Ark was made of wood, and the Lord Christ bought the church with His Blood on the wood of the Cross.

After they entered the ark, God closed the door on them to protect them from the flood (Gen 7:16). Likewise, inside the church, we are protected by God from the flood of this world.

Only 8 people were saved from the flood in the ark.

The number 8 represents a new beginning (7 being a complete number).

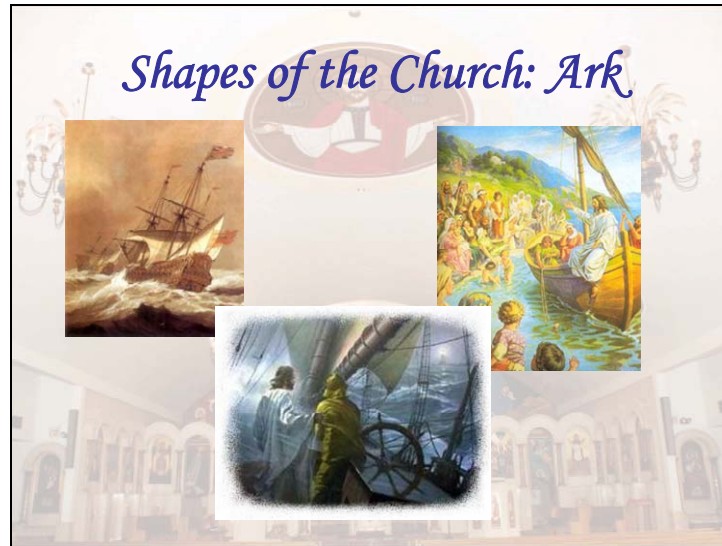
Those who enter the church and are saved from the flood, have a new beginning, being born of the Holy Spirit.

The dimensions of the ark are very comparable to those of the human body.

The length of the body = 6 X his width, and 10 X his girth

The dimensions of the ark were (300 X 50 X 30)

The Lord Christ (the symbol of Ark) became man to save us.



In the New Testament: The whole shape of the church represents an ark

The Church Fathers teach us the following symbolisms:

The Ship carries many different people from different races in the midst of a fierce tempest

God the Father is the owner of the ship

The Lord Christ is the captain

The Bishop is the watchman

The priests are the seamen

The deacons are the rowers

The sea is the world, in which the church has entered, but it is not destroyed because its captain is clever.

The ship carries the cross in it (The flag of victory over death)

The ropes that tie the ship together is the love of the Lord Christ

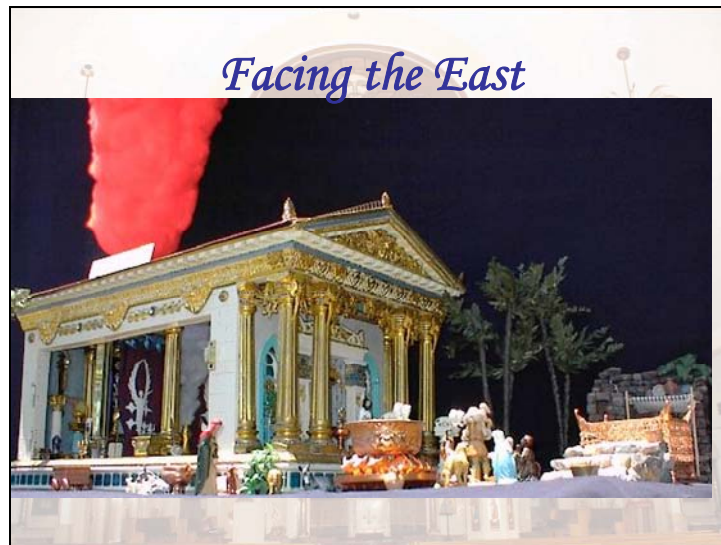
The net of the ship is the baptismal font where the believers are drawn and are born anew

It has iron cables, which are the commandments of the Lord Christ, strong as iron

It has sailors on the left and right sides, which are the angels who keep and direct the church

The ladder that leads up the ship is the commemoration of the passion of Christ the Lord, which lifts us up to heaven.

The sails that are raised above the ship are the saints and martyrs who have entered into His rest.



In the Old Testament, the Tabernacle and Solomon's temple faced the west, why?

The Garden of Eden was in the East (Gen 2:8)

When man sinned, he was cast out of the garden and was told not to return again, so he could not look towards it.

When Solomon consecrated the temple, he faced the west and said that God lives in the fog; because of the people's sins they could see His face no more.

Then he turned towards the east, raised up his hands and glorified God, and he asked for forgiveness for his people.

This all represented that the tabernacle and the temple were not able to return man back to the paradise, which was shut until the Lord Christ came and opened it Himself.



Why do churches in the New Testament face the east?

Why do churches in the New Testament face the east?

The west was the direction that represented the sealing of paradise, but after the Lord Christ opened it, we should now look towards it.

The East is the direction in which the sun rises, and Christ the Lord is our "Sun of righteousness" (Mal 4:2)

It is the place where the glory of God appears (Isa 59:19, Ezk 43:1-2)

Salvation from the enemies is from the east (2Ki 13:16-19)

It is the place of the first paradise (Gen 2:8) to which we long to return.

The Lord Christ will come from the east (Mt 24:27)

St. Athanasius said that when the Lord Christ was crucified, He was facing the west, so we should be looking towards Him.

That's why the Crucifix is placed facing the west.

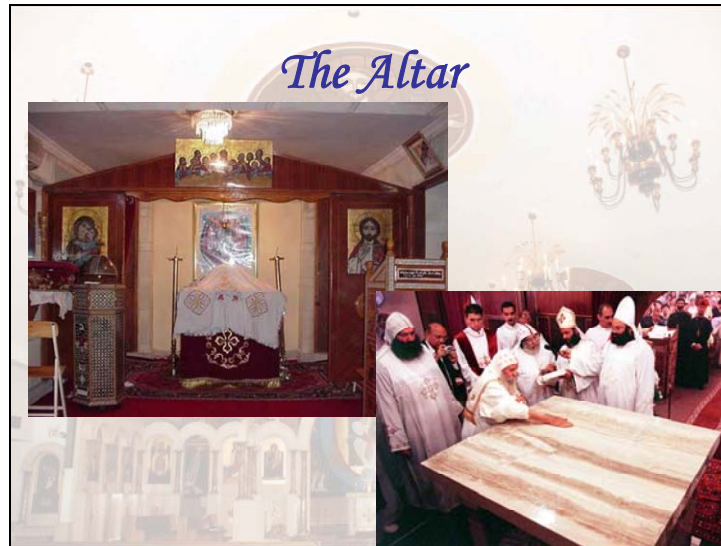


The Church is Shaped like the Tabernacle, with three sections

The First Section is the Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) and represents Heaven.
It contains the altar, the dome, the steps, and the Eastern wall

The Second Section is called the "Nave".

The Third Section is the baptismal font, at the western area of the Church



The Altar: where the sacrifice is offered

It is square in shape

Made out of either wood or marble

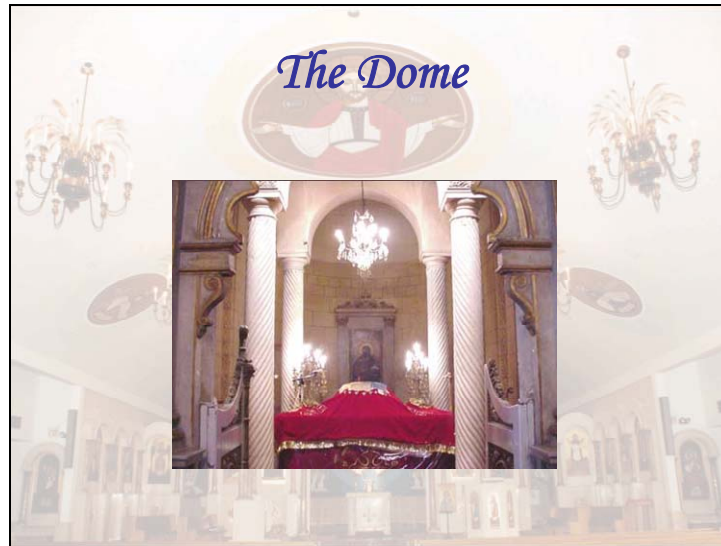
It has three coverings on top

It Must have a "holy board" on top, which is the board consecrated by the Holy Oil of Myron.

The holy board is only necessary for an altar that has yet to be consecrated. After consecration, the holy board is no longer required.

It is called the Altar, because upon it is presented the True Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ

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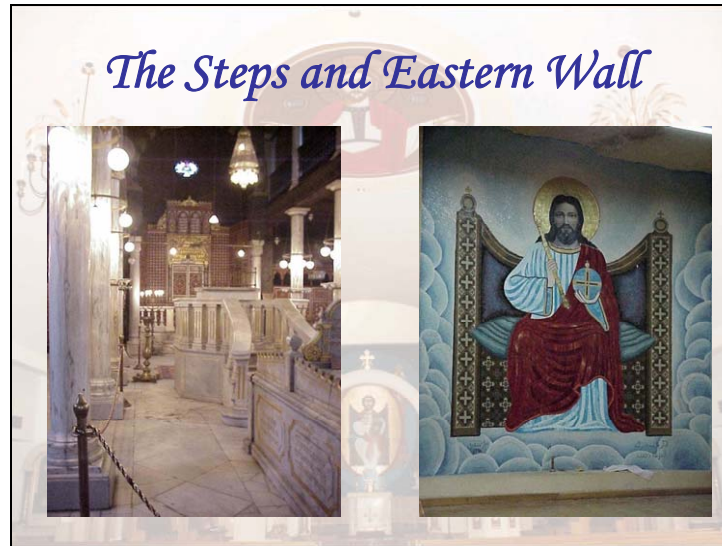


above the altar, we see the dome:

Positioned on four columns

Painted in blue to represent Heaven, with angels drawn on it

Curtains are sometimes suspended from between the columns



The Steps:

Seven semi-circular steps that lead up to the Bishop's throne, underneath the Eastern wall

The Bishop would be sitting under the feet of the Lord Christ

In order for the Bishop to take his place, he would climb seven (complete) steps (which represent the fullness of virtues)

He teaches the people from behind the Altar, because his words and service are not due to his own righteousness, but to the righteousness of Christ the Lord.

The Eastern wall: Is a semi-circular wall also called the "Father's bosom"

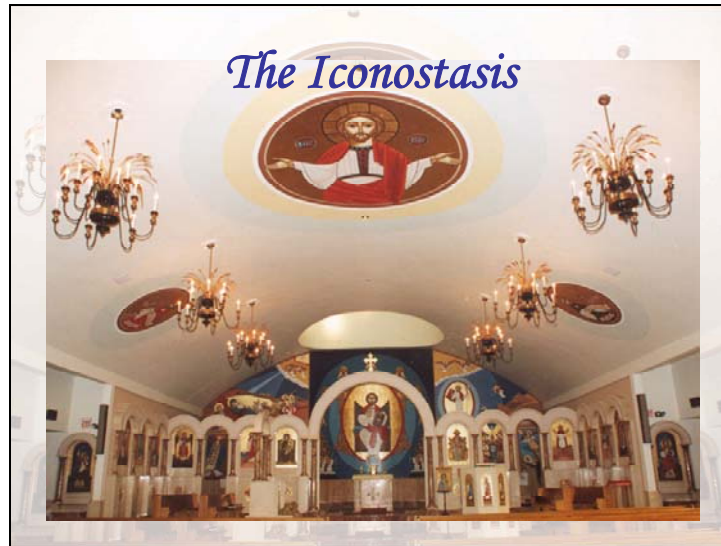
It has an Icon of the Lord Christ sitting, surrounded by cherubim and seraphim

He carries in one hand the earth (because He is the controller of everything – the Pantocrator)

He carries a scepter in the other hand to shepherd His people (Jn 10:11)

He is looking directly at the people and lovingly opening His bosom to them longing to accept each and every soul to Himself.

Only the Icon of the Lord Christ should be in the Sanctuary as He alone is in Heaven until the final judgment after which the souls of the righteous in Paradise will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.



The Gateway to the Sanctuary is called the "Royal Gate" from which only the priests shall enter. The Sanctuary is separated from the church by an iconostasis (carrier of the icons) It is not a divider (like the veil of the tabernacle), but a means to enter into the Holy of Holies (through the prayers of the saints) The "Royal Door" is covered with a red curtain, to represent the Blood of Christ; It is through His Blood that we are able to enter into the Holy of Holies once again.

The Icons are placed in a specific order on the iconostasis

On the right side of the Royal Gate, we find icons of:

Christ the Lord

St. John the Baptist

The Saint of the church

Any other saint or martyr, or any biblical event

On the left side, we find icons of :

St. Mary the Theotokos (Mother of God)

The Annunciation (of the Lord Christ's birth)

Archangel Michael

St. Mark, The Evangelizer of our Church



An icon is not simply a religious picture

An icon is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to man

Through icons, an Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world

An Icon is a "Window into Heaven"

Icons give us real examples of people who were able to lead a righteous life, and have conquered and joined the Victorious Church.

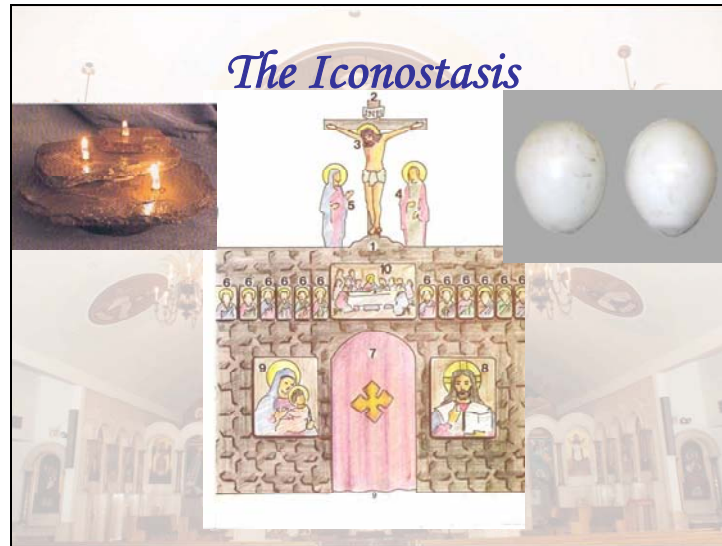
It gives us hope and comfort.

An Icon represents the true presence of the saint written on it.

In the Church, we truly believe that the saints attend the services with us, and we give them the most honorable place in the Church, right on the iconostasis, the "front row".

Even in the Old Testament, God commanded the people to use Icons in their worship.

He commanded Moses to place two cherubim on the ark of covenant, and to draw images of Cherubim on the veil and the coverings of the Tabernacle.



Above the iconostasis, we find

The Icon of the Last supper, surrounded by the icons of the 12 disciples;

This represents that the Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles, with the Lord Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.

Above them is the Lord Christ crucified, with St. Mary at His right and St. John the Beloved at His left

Ostrich eggs are hung in between them

Eggs represent the Resurrection (life inside a tomb)

Lighted oil lamps are hung in front of all the icons indicating that the light of the Lord Christ shone through them.

However, a lighted lamp is never placed before the Icon of the Lord Christ, since He is the true light of the world



Inside the Sanctuary, on top of the Altar, we see

The Throne (Ark)

A wooden square box, where the chalice sits, on top of the Altar

It is called the Throne because the precious Blood of the Lord Christ "sits" in it

It is called the Ark because the Blood which gives life to all who drink from it, is represented by the pot of Manna which was in the Ark of covenant and was a symbol of the true Body of Christ the Lord



The Chalice

The cup that carries the Blood of the Lord Christ

The Lord Christ used a chalice when He instituted the Eucharist (as mentioned in Matt 26:26-27)

The (Myster)

The spoon used to administer the precious Blood to the believers



The Paten

The plate that holds the Body of the Lord Christ.

Christ the Lord probably did not use a paten, but the church uses it to protect against losing any particles from the Body of the Lord Christ

The Body of the Lord Christ is placed in it so it represents:

The womb of St. Mary

The manger where the Lord Christ was born

and

The tomb, where His Holy Body was laid.

The Dome (the Star)

Made of two arches that cross together and form the shape of a cross

There is usually a small cross on top of it

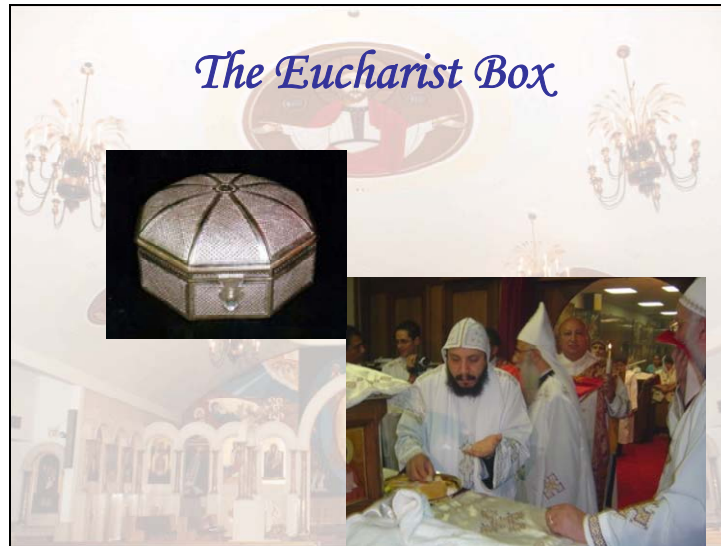
Represents the star that appeared to the wise men and stopped above the house where the Lord Jesus lay



The Gospel

A metal case, wherein a copy of the four Gospels are placed.

An icon of St. Mary is usually on one side, and an icon of the Cross on the other



The Eucharist Box

A box where the sacraments are placed to be administered to the sick and elderly who are unable to come to the church to receive communion

It is sometimes called the "Treasure Box", because the Body of Christ, which is as precious as a treasure is placed in it.

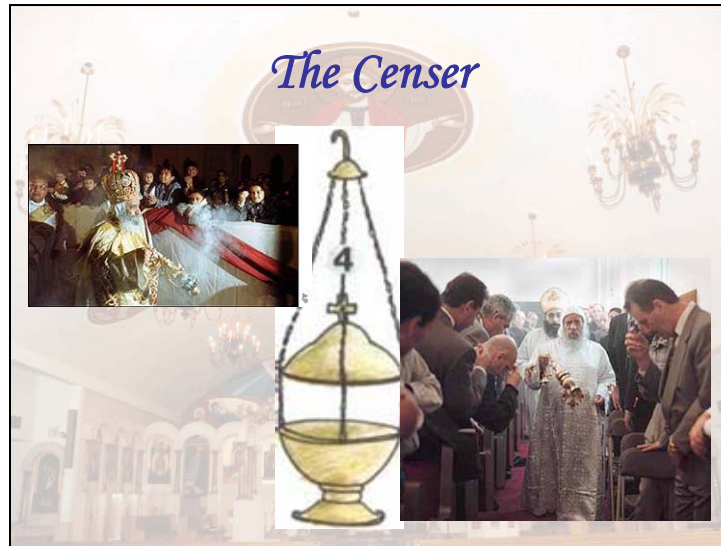


The Incense box

A Box where the incense is placed to be used during the Divine Liturgy

It is placed on the Altar

Incense represents the prayers of the saints



The Censer

The Censer as a whole, represents the Virgin St. Mary

The upper dome represents heaven

The lower dome represents the womb of St. Mary

The coal represents the Lord Christ's Humanity

The fire represents the Lord Christ's Divinity

The incense on top of the coal is the aroma that we received when He presented Himself as a true Sacrifice, and we smelled Him, as did His Good Father

The three chains represent the Trinity, and are united by one chain in the Middle (the unity of the Trinity)



The Fans

Are objects with round heads and a long handles

The head is shaped like the halo around a saint's head and the face of a Seraph is drawn inside it

They Represent the Seraphim

They are used by two deacons during the Praise of the Seraphim

Other Vessels used in the Church include:

The Holy Myron or Holy Oil container

The Oblation basket

The cymbals and triangle



Originally, The Nave of the Church was separated into three sections or choruses:

Section of the Deacons

Section of the Believers

Section of the Catechumens – those who were learning the faith, but were not baptized yet.

They were permitted to attend only the Liturgy of the Catechumens or the Liturgy of the Word, which ends with the reading of the Gospel and the sermon.

After that, the doors of the Church were shut, and all the believers remained the prayed the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and participated in the Holy Sacraments.

The Nave contains:

The Pulpit, from where the readings and the Sermons are delivered

The domes of the Church

The Columns, usually 12 representing the 12 Apostles

The Lakan, or the place for the Liturgy of the waters

And the three gates of the Church.

In the North West corner of the church is the Baptismal font

Because through Baptism, we are taken from darkness into light, and from being far away from God to His bosom

(so we move from west to east and from back to front)

Salvation is completed through Baptism:

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”

(Mk 16:16)

The Coptic Orthodox Church practices Baptism by Immersion.

It is mentioned about Christ Himself: “Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water. . .” (Matt 3:16)



In the Book of Revelation, St. John the Beloved saw a woman who appeared in heaven clothed with the sun, and crowned with twelve stars, and having the moon for her footstool, and being with child, and travailing in birth

Abba Methodius explains that this is a symbol of the Church saying:

"She is the power which is desired to give light, the Spirit crying to her saying: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness covers the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see; all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side." It is the Church whose children shall come to her with all speed, running to her from all quarters. She rejoices receiving the light which never dims, and clothed with the brightness of the Word as with a robe."

This is our Church and this is her glory!