

## Tasbeha – Praising in the Church

*In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.*

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

*“But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).* The power of a song is undisputed. A nation’s character is often formed by its songs. The Bible also bursts with songs. Moses and the children of Israel sang after they were delivered from the slavery of Pharaoh and crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15). The prophetess and judge, Deborah, burst into song after Israel destroyed Jabin the king of Canaan (Judges 5). In the book of Revelation, we find the heavenly hosts praising God unceasingly and giving glory, honor, and thanks to Him who sits on the throne (Revelation 4-7).

In this verse from the book of Acts, Saints Paul and Silas are found singing songs at midnight after having been thrown into prison in the city of Philippi. It is easy to sing in the daytime, when we find hope and light. How about at night? Can we be found singing songs at night and praising the name of the Lord? Can we be found in the midst of the darkness of sin that seems to take its toll on us and burdens us...can we be found rising above darkness and sin and lifting up a song of praise?

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<sup>1</sup> Coniaris, Anthony M. Homilies from an Orthodox Pulpit. Light and Life Publishing Company, Minneapolis, MN, 1992 (page 64).

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### **Praise in the Coptic Orthodox Church**

#### ***Praise as a Function of the Church***

Praise is an important part of the life of the Church. It is a cooperative function between the Church of Christ on earth and the Church of Christ in heaven. Praise, is the work of the angels and saints, and in praising God, we participate with them. *“Praise Him, all His angels; Praise Him, all His hosts” (Psalm 148:2), “I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You” (Psalm 22:22), and “Praise God in all His saints” (Psalm 150:1).*

In praising God on earth, we are preparing for the day when we will stand before His throne and praise the Lord incessantly in the kingdom of heaven.

#### ***Praise in the Early Church***

As a living continuation of the early church, the Orthodox Church continues the life of praise as practiced at that time. *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:46-47).*

#### ***Praise as a Living Sacrifice***

In praising God, we present ourselves as a living sacrifice to Christ, Who presented Himself as the Sacrifice for our sins. It is amazing that during Holy Week, as we commemorate the passions of our Lord and His death on the cross, that we chant a hymn of praise (the Doxology of *Pascha*), *“Yours is the power and the glory and the blessing and the majesty forever. Amen.”*

In the liturgy, we chant, *“A mercy of peace; a sacrifice of praise.”* What is this sacrifice? In the psalms, we read, *“Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (141:2).* Saint Paul also writes, *“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me” (Hebrews 10:5)* and *“Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15).* The sacrifice of praise is the offering up of ourselves. We leave behind our cares and needs and focus our whole attention on God’s glory.

#### ***Praises in the Coptic Rite***

The Coptic Church offers us many prayers and songs of praise in the psalmody, the book that contains a collection of praises.

There are three main services of praise that take place throughout the year: 1) **Vespers Praise**, 2) **Midnight Praise**, and 3) **Matins Praise**. Those who partake in these praises have found its beautiful chants and spiritual words and meanings to be a source of great comfort and peace.

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### ***The Life of Praise***

The offering of praise is not just reserved to the services of the Church. It is a way of life. In praising God, we attribute our success and good deeds to God's work in us. We deny ourselves and focus our attention on the Savior. In praising God always, we put away our sins and purify our lips and hearts. The mention of the Lord's name in praise comforts our hearts and brings us peace. We pray that these services and rites, with their chants and hymns, become starting points for us in our life of praise.

### **Midnight Praise Basics**

#### **1. The Odes<sup>2</sup>**

- a. The First Ode
  - i. Exodus 15
  - ii. This is the song of Moses and the children of Israel, who crossed the Red Sea in a miraculous way and gave thanks to and glorified God for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the bondage of Pharaoh.
  - iii. Likewise, we were under the bondage of Satan, but were delivered from the slavery of sin and death through the waters of baptism.
- b. The Second Ode
  - i. Psalm 135 (136)
  - ii. This is a song of thanksgiving that the Church offers to Christ out of her love for Him. In this hymn, we remember God's great mercy toward his creation and to us, His children.
- c. The Third Ode
  - i. The third ode is the song of the three holy youth found in the book of Daniel (in the Septuagint). They sang this song when King Nebuchadnezzar threw them in the furnace, calling upon the whole of creation to bless (praise) the Lord.
  - ii. This is sung by the church in a joyful tune to remind us that, even if we pass through the fire (trials and tribulations) of this world, God is in the midst of the furnace changing the fire into cool dew.
- d. The Fourth Ode
  - i. Comprised of Psalms 148, 149, 150. In chanting this ode, the believers share with all of creation in offering praise to their Creator. These psalms express the state of joy, victory, and rejoicing from the whole heart and soul.

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<sup>2</sup> The Coptic word hwc (*Hoas*) means 'song' or 'praise'.

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2. **The *Psali* ('ali) of the day** – *Psali* is a Greek word meaning 'a chant.' Each day of the week has its own chant. There are *psalis* for our Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Mary, and for the feasts and fasts of the Coptic Year. In addition, we find the *Psali* of the Three Holy Youth after the Third Ode of the Midnight Praise. In the Saturday and Sunday *Psalis*, for instance, the chant focuses on the name of the Lord Jesus as the congregation chants the refrain, "O my Lord Jesus Christ, my Good Savior" (Saturday *Psali* for the Lord Jesus) and "My Lord Jesus (Christ), help me" (Sunday *Psali* for the Lord Jesus).
3. **The *Theotokia* of the day** – *Theotokias* are glorification chants for the *Theotokos* ('birth-giver of God'), Saint Mary. Each day of the week has its own *Theotokia*. Through these hymns, we glorify the mystery of the incarnation of the Lord and the miraculous virgin birth. We also learn of the symbols, types, and prophecies concerning Saint Mary as found in the Old Testament. Each *Theotokia* ends with a *lwbs* (*loavsh*), or 'explanation.' This part explains the symbols of Saint Mary previously mentioned in the *Theotokia*.
4. **Conclusion of the *Theotokias*** – There are two conclusions of the *Theotokias*: *Adam* and *Vatos*. These hymns remind us of the Lord's Second Coming (in the *Vatos* conclusion) and God's infinite mercy (in the *Adam* Conclusion).

### 'Adam' and 'Vatos'

*Adam* (*Adam*) is the first word of the Monday *Theotokia* and it means 'Adam.' The *Adam* days are Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. The term, *Adam*, also refers to the tune of the hymns. Thus, the *Psalis* and the *Theotokias* of the *Adam* days have a unique tune. The *Adam* days remind us of the Lord's resurrection, so we notice that the tune is uplifting and joyous.

*Pibatoc* (*Pi vatos*) is the first word of the Thursday *Theotokia*. It means 'the bush', referring to the burning bush Moses the Prophet saw in the wilderness. The *Vatos* days are Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The *Psalis* and the *Theotokias* of the *Vatos* days also have a unique tune. The *Vatos* days remind us of the Lord's passions: His arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. Thus, we notice that the tune of these days is more subdued than that of the *Adam* days.

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### **The Koiak Praises**

The Koiak praises are commonly referred to as “7 & 4”. Because the Feast of the Nativity and the Advent Fast largely falls in the Coptic month of Koiak, many of the hymns and praises of this month focus on the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and the miraculous birth giving of Saint Mary the virgin. The “7&4” refer to the seven *Theotokias* (one for each day of the week) and the four odes chanted each night during the month of Koiak.

### **Conclusion**

Let us all participate in the praises of the Coptic month of Koiak. Let us take the opportunity to focus on the teachings about and the praises offered to our holy mother, Saint Mary. The Koiak praises are not just songs to be sung, but through these hymns, the Church wishes to teach us her theology and doctrine. In addition, through these praises, we offer up a living sacrifice to our Lord Jesus Christ.

**GLORY IS DUE TO GOD FOREVER. AMEN.**