

FEASTS, MINOR

There are seven minor feasts celebrated by the Coptic church.

Feast of Circumcision

This feast occurs on 6 Tubah.

The practice of circumcision started with Abraham, in fulfillment of God's covenant (Gn. 17:9-14), by which every male child should be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. According to the New Testament, however, the sanctity of this ritual was superseded by the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Consequently, just as the uncircumcised were not allowed to partake of the Passover lamb, those who have not been baptized are not allowed to partake of Holy Communion: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:11-12). Saint Paul reiterates this point in most of his epistles, but he sums it up succinctly in Galatians: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal. 6:15).

During the [apostolic](#) age, a controversy arose as to whether circumcision was essential as a religious practice. The apostles met in 51-52 at Jerusalem and agreed to send Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas Barsabas and Silas, to Antioch to settle the issue by explaining the real significance of circumcision in the light of the teachings of the New Testament (Acts 15:1-29).

Article 51 (7-13) of Ibn al-'Assal's *Al-Majmu' al-Safawi* (The Legal Compendium) states that circumcision is a practice followed out of habit and not in compliance with any religious ordinance, and that, though optional, it should not be carried out once a person has been baptized.

Likewise, Bishop Athanasius of Qus explained that circumcision was not prescribed for females either prior to, or following, baptism (a remark quoted by Ibn al-'Assal).

Candlemas

Celebrated on 8 Amshir, Candlemas commemorates Christ's entry with the Virgin [Mary](#) forty days after His birth into the temple at Jerusalem. In accordance with the law of Moses, a mother had to present her newborn child at the temple at the end of the prescribed period of purification, which was forty days in the case of a male child and eighty in the case of a female child (Lev. 12:2-8). The same law demanded that every firstborn male was to be consecrated to the service of God (hence the words of Lk. 2:22-23). The Levites were later chosen from among the children of Israel to be consecrated priests, but as they were found to be outnumbered, it was decreed that first-born male children were to be redeemed for a sum of money (five shekels).

Notwithstanding the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus, [Mary](#) and Joseph "performed all things according to the law of the Lord" (Lk. 2:39).

Candlemas is also the celebration of the meeting between the infant Jesus and Simeon the elder, who was "righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Lk. 2:25). It had been disclosed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah.

From the reading for 8 Amshir in the Coptic SYNAXARION we learn that Simeon was one of the translators of the Septuagint. While working on the text of Isaiah 7:14 ("Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel") Simeon was skeptical, and felt inclined to use the word "maid" instead of "virgin." In a vision, the Lord promised him that he would not see death until he had seen the [Lord Jesus](#) Christ in person,

born of the Virgin.

Another person who witnessed the presentation of Christ into the temple was the prophetess Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher, a devout wife for seven years and a widow for eighty-four years, who served God with fastings and prayers in the temple. She, too, gave thanks to the Lord for granting her the sight of the Redeemer.

In the course of celebrating this feast, the congregation carries candles to signify that Christ is the light of the world and that, in the words of Simeon, He is a “light for revelation to the Gentiles.”

The entry of the Holy Family into Egypt

This feast is celebrated on 24 Bashans. [*See also [FLIGHT INTO EGYPT.](#)*]

Feast of the Marriage at Cana

This feast occurs on 13 Tubah. It celebrates the first miracle performed by Jesus Christ during His ministry, when He changed the water into wine, thereby manifesting His glory to His disciples who consequently “believed in Him” (Jn. 2:11).

The following truths may be deduced from this miraculous event:

1. It is the first evidence of the power of Jesus Christ over matter, a power derived from within. Jesus demonstrates this power in later similar situations such as the healing of the woman who had an issue of blood, by her merely touching Him (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8:43-48).
1. It establishes the intercessional character of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is evident in Jesus’ prompt response to her request.
2. It is an advance [confirmation](#) of the mystery of the Eucharist, the conversion of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Consequently, the continuous growth in the spiritual life is dependent on the full integration with Christ, like branches in their relation to the vine. “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (Jn. 15:4).

The wine converted at Cana was not intoxicating, but “good” wine as testified to by the owner of the feast, wholesome and beneficial, rather like the wine of blessing mentioned in Genesis 27:28, 37, and in Deuteronomy 7:13, or the eucharistic wine.

1. It is a manifest indication that the church blesses the marriage and treats it as a sacrament. Hence there are many references to the marriage feast of Cana in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Again, in the offering of incense on the eve of 13 Tubah, the lection from Matthew 19, which is used in the prayers during the matrimony service, is included in the celebration of the Feast of Cana of Galilee, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female. . . . What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mt. 19:4-6).

Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday commemorates Christ’s institution of the sacrament of Eucharist; “Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'” (Mt. 26:26-28; Mk. 14:22-24; Lk. 22:19, 20; Jn. 6:53-58; 1 Cor. 11:23- 29; 10:16-17).

As with all covenants drawn between God and man and consolidated by means of a blood bond (e.g., circumcision in the case of Abraham, and the paschal lamb in the case of Moses), Christ’s redemptive covenant was

confirmed on the cross by means of His precious blood. The commemorative service that the Coptic church holds on Maundy Thursday, the only day with a Liturgy in Holy Week, is particularly rich in spiritual nourishment. It falls into three main parts.

The first part covers the canonical hours of Holy Week, starting with the first hour (or morning prayer), followed by the third, sixth, and ninth hours, in each of which the lection from the Old Testament is in perfect harmony with that from the New Testament. After each hour the relevant Psalm is chanted in a special sad melody, then follow the appointed readings from the Gospels, and finally, a short passage, called *tarh* in the commentary, is usually sung as a hymn.

The second part is the service of foot-washing, known as LAQQAN, [meaning](#) basin. As in the service for the sanctification of the waters on the feast of the Epiphany, the priest prays over a basin filled with water, with a lighted candle on either side. There are nine readings from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament, and some prayers and homilies on the theme of humility, meekness, and self-denial that our Lord taught us by precept and practice. An actual foot-washing takes place, following the example of Jesus Christ: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (Jn. 13:14, 15). Vested in an *epitrachelion* (see LITURGICAL VESTMENTS), the high priest dips a cloth into the consecrated water and washes the feet of his fellow priests and the congregation.

The third part is the liturgy proper, in obedience to Jesus’ commandment: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:25). It is noteworthy that in the Maundy Thursday Eucharist, in view of the Passion of our Lord and the particular incidents that take place prior to His resurrection, the following changes are made:

1. The Psalms that precede the offering of the lamb are omitted.

2. There are no lections from the Catholic epistles or the Acts of the Apostles. The reading from the Pauline epistle is confined to 1 Corinthians 11:23-34.
1. The Gospel reading, which is taken from Matthew 26:20-29, is preceded by these relevant verses from the Psalms: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5) and “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted up his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9).
2. The prayer of reconciliation (as reconciliation is only effected through the Crucifixion) is omitted.
3. The kiss of peace is omitted (because Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus with a kiss).
4. Three sections from the Creed—“He was crucified for us at the time of Pontius Pilate”; “He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again from the dead, according to the Scriptures”; and “He ascended to the heavens; he sat at the right hand of His Father; He will also come again in His glory to judge the living and the dead; of Whose Kingdom there shall be no end”—are dropped.
5. The commemoration of the saints is omitted. While Holy Communion is being administered, the usual Psalm (150) and its accompanying expressions of exultation are to be replaced by three readings from the eleventh canonical hour, taken from the Old Testament. The Psalm and Saint John’s Gospel (13:21-30) are then read in a sad melody. Finally, the priest gives the blessing and dismissal.

Late on Maundy Thursday evening, prayers are resumed in preparation for the rite of Good Friday.

Sunday of Thomas

The feast of Thomas falls on the first Sunday after the Resurrection. Thomas was one of the twelve disciples chosen by Christ (Mt. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; Jn. 11:16). In Saint John’s Gospel, he is always referred to

as Didymus (Aramaic, twin).

When Jesus Christ appeared to the disciples after His resurrection, Thomas was not present (Jn. 20), and on hearing of it he was skeptical. He suspended his belief pending actually seeing the marks of the wounds with his own eyes and touching them with his own fingers. When, therefore, Jesus appeared to the disciples the following Sunday He asked Thomas to dispel his doubts, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing” (Jn. 20:27).

A clearer idea of the true character of Thomas can be grasped if we take into account that he once offered to die with Jesus on His way to see Lazarus in Bethany. “Let us also go, that we may die with him,” said Thomas when he learned that the Jews were seeking to kill Him (Jn. 11:16). One does not doubt the sincerity of such a statement. Though he could not accept facts unless verified by experience like a great many people who have less faith than reason, the so-called doubting Thomas was the very first among the twelve disciples to confess the divinity of Jesus Christ.

The moment he assured himself of the reality of the scars in Christ’s hands and in His side, faith welled up from within him and he proclaimed, “My Lord and my God.” Christ’s rebuke, however, is of particular significance to all those who share Thomas’s skepticism: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn. 20:29).

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Transfiguration

The vision of Jesus Christ’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor was witnessed by three disciples—Peter, James, and John—in fulfillment of Christ’s promise, “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who

will not taste death before they see the [Son of man](#) coming in his kingdom” (Mt. 16:28; Mk. 9:1; Lk. 9:27). This, however, was not the first time that these three disciples were chosen by Christ for a particular grace to be bestowed upon them. We learn from Mark 5:37-40 that when Jesus Lord was on his way to raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead, “he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.” He also singled them out to be with Him during His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane: “remain here, and watch with me” (Mt. 26:37-39; Mk. 14:33-35).

If we were to suggest possible grounds to justify the special treatment accorded to these three disciples, we might offer the following considerations. Peter was the eldest disciple, and the first of the twelve to proclaim the sonship of our Lord, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). James was the first disciple to gain the crown of martyrdom. He was killed by Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great (Acts 12:1-2). John, the brother of James, both of whom Jesus surnamed Boanerges (the sons of thunder) because of their notable zeal and fervor, was himself the very personification of purity and chastity, which earned him the special love of Christ.

As regards the number of the disciples who were present at the Transfiguration, it is in keeping with the established precept necessitating two or three for a lawful witness (Dt. 17:6; Mt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1).

According to church tradition, the location of the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, the same spot that saw the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20). Some scholars, however, dispute this and suggest Mount Hermon or the Mount of Olives instead. Mention is consistently made in the *Euchologion* and the doxology of Mount Tabor, particularly in the Psalmody of Good Friday, where Christ is described as transfigured on Tabor.

In the Western churches the feast of Transfiguration was recognized only toward the end of the Middle Ages. The Eastern churches, however, started to [observe](#) it at a much earlier date, first as a local and unofficial feast, then solemnized some time before the end of the first millennium. There are records that as early as the sixth century three churches had been built on the eastern slope of Mount Tabor, in memory of the three tabernacles that Peter requested permission to make. The Copts observe this minor feast on 13 Misra.

The special significance of the Transfiguration lies in the fact that, with the appearance of Moses and Elijah next to Christ, it provided testimony of the Jewish law and prophets to the messianic nature of Christ, and gave further divine proclamation of His sonship to God by these words: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 17:5).

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