Coptic Hymns By Deacon Nabih Fanous

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Â **Introduction** Music is the language used by the Seraphim in heaven and humans on earth to Praise God. It is the language of the soul as prayer is the language of the heart. St Augustine says "There is no emotion of the human spirit which music is incapable of expressing". Â In spite that Coptic hymns are primitive and very ancient they are still alive and appeal to both the simple and the sophisticated. It offers joy, peace, stimulation and fulfillment to whoever takes interest in it. All other forms of music run out of fashion with time but the Coptic hymns have provided the Copts with an everlasting means of praising God as well as of self comfort. Â It is very cumbersome to try to trace back the origin of the Coptic hymns as they were not recorded on musical notes but in the minds of clergy and deacons. Thus, no one can be certain as to how the hymns were developed and to what extent they were influenced by the surrounding cultures and time. However we are certain of one thing; that they were developed through the gifts and inspirations which accompanied the Apostalic Period. Â As to the value of hymns in the Coptic Church, our fathers consider that God's praise through hymns is the means which lead to the rewards obtained in the holy Sacraments i.e. praise is essential for receiving the grace of God. **Â Historical Development Of Hymns A. In the Old Testament:** Man has used music in the worship and praise of God since the very early days of humanity. It started during the days of Adam and reached a peak during the life of King David who's Psalms and hymns are still in use today. The Old Testament is full of references to the use of music and musical instruments in the Jewish worship. **Â B. The Early Church in General:** The early church was founded by the "Jewish" apostles and hence it is expected that the early church must have been influenced by the Jewish music. This music took two forms; the Temple music which was vocal and the Synagogue music which used musical instruments. An evidence of such an influence is the universal use of the Jewish word 'Alleluia' in all churches. Â Such an influence, however, varied from one church to another depending on the language, culture, music and tradition of the various nations. No attempt was made by the early preachers to dictate a uniform system of prayer on all churches. Rather they devoted their teachings to faith and doctrine and left the remaining details to individual churches to be arranged in accordance with their traditions and culture. An example of this is the Ethiopian Church which used dancing and their hymns and music totally differ from its parent church; the Coptic Church. Â As to the wording of hymns used in the early church, it began with poorly written extracts of translated Psalms. Shortly afterwards the church realised the value of hymns and praise in establishing proper worship. As a result effort of writers and poets were poured into formulating hymns and praise passages. **Â The Serian Hymns:** (Iraque, Syria, India) – The Serian hymns were totally dominated by the hymns of St Avram who influenced not only the eastern church but the western church also. This saint who is known as the flout of the Holy Spirit reached peaks in spiritual depths and musical talents that he lived in his hymns. During the life of St Avram the Serian hymns entered a new era in depth and excellence and his hymns are still alive in the Serian Church today. **Â The Byzantine Hymns:** (Greece and Turkey) – This Church adopted a lot of music and hymns of the Serian Church but because of the language barrier it did not advance as rapidly as other

churches. In fact it did not really begin until the end of the sixth century through Anatolius the bishop of Constantinople, Romans and others. **Â The Latin Hymns:** (Rome) – Its music was also influenced by the eastern church but its real founder is St Ilary followed by St Ambrose who is considered the Prince of the Latin music (equivalent to St Avram of the Serian Church) with over 100 hymns related to him, followed by St Augustine and others. Â In comparison with the Byzantine music, the Latin music was considered more spiritual and more realistic as it was centred around Christ and Salvation. It became the source of all western music and the basis of the Protestant hymns after the sixteenth century. **Â The Coptic Hymns:** Historical evidence suggests that the Coptic hymns existed since the Apostolic ages. It was formulated and formalised during the foundation of the Coptic Church. Contrary to the western churches whose hymns were developed with time, the Coptic hymns remained unchanged. **Â Development of Coptic Hymns** The Coptic hymns began to develop shortly after the preaching of St Mark the Apostle in Alexandria. Early Christians were basically Jews, who lived in large numbers in Alexandria, and Egyptians. Both groups have contributed to the formation of the Coptic hymns, namely: Â Â Â Â - The Christian Jews brought with them well established hymns both in wording and music. Â Â Â Â - The Christian Egyptians brought with them the very deep music of the Pharaohs relating to immortality of the sprit, the one God and resurrection. Â Both contributions mixed exceptionally well due to the similarity of the background of the two cultures, but mainly due to the dedication of the early Coptic Christians. That dedication was so strong that those new believers sold everything and devoted their lives to worship in monasteries near Lake Mariut first (in the forties of the first century) and then afterwards they spread to other locations. Â With such devotion and zeal efforts were concentrated to establish the system of prayer, wording and music of hymns, the Liturgy, the system of hourly prayers etc. Â An evidence of the early development of the Coptic hymns (basically the first two centuries) is the discovery of an ancient hymn called ‘xorinex’ recorded on musical notes near the City of Bahnassa in Upper Egypt which dates back to the third century. **Â Nature of the Coptic Hymns** Coptic hymns are deep, harmonic and exactly defined songs meant to express the innermost emotions of the praising spirit. They do not follow musical notes or dedicated rhythm but rather they translate the pulses of the spirit. No doubt, the Coptic hymns were the product of highly spiritual people guided by the gifts and inspirations that were pertinent to the apostolic period. As such, it would seem impossible to duplicate it or challenge it by musicians. Â This conclusion was confirmed by the English musician Professor Earnst Newland Smith who visited Cairo in the winter of 1927 upon an invitation from Mr. Ragheb Moftah the Egyptian researcher. The English musician listened to the entire range of Coptic music and documented it in 18 volumes. Some of his findings and comments are listed below: Â "What we understand today as oriental music appears simply a degradation of what was once a great art. This music which has been handed down for untold generations within the Coptic Church should be a bridge between the east and the West and place a new idiom at the disposal of Western musicians. It is lofty, noble and great art especially in the element of the infinite, which is lacking today. Western music has its origin in ancient Egypt". He also says, "Give me the voice of Ceruso singing the Coptic hymns and I shall destroy the walls of Jericho." **Â Importance Of Hymns A. To Coptic Studies:** Coptic hymns are essential to any Coptic study simply because it is related to the Church’s tradition, rites, worship and spirituality. This could be appreciated if we imagine our church services without hymns?! **Â B. To the Coptic Church:Â** 1. In a non-apostolic church such as the Protestant churches hymns are used to prepare the spirit for prayers or listening to Preaching. Contrary to that, however, in the Apostolic churches especially the Coptic Church hymns are itself a worship for both the singer and the listener. Thus there is no specific time allocated for the hymns in the service but the whole service is a symphony consisting of the priest, deacons and congregation served by the music. In other words the hymn is the part of the service during which the spirit is let free to praise God with its full capacity and strength. Â 2. The hymns represent a valuable inheritance, which

dates back to the apostolic age unchanged. Thus are regarded as part of the Church's Sacraments and a living gift, which could be obtained through learning. Those who learn it become distinguished servants of the holies and participants of one of the church's most valuable Sacraments, namely, Praising God! Â 3. Praising God is highly honoured by the Coptic Church to the same degree as the Holy Sacraments as it is a 'sacrament of the heart'. Thus, the Discolia warns even the bishop against taking hymns lightly or neglecting it. It says: "If you, 'bishop', were sitting teaching or listening to the reader or the singer and an important personality enters the Church do not allow yourself to be distracted but continue talking or listening to the readings or the hymns' **Â C. To the Coptic Person** 1. The Coptic hymns are phrases written around Divinity, faith and theological beliefs, which reflects the human conception of the nature of God. When it is sung driven by the spirit it expresses our participation in this faith and our thirst to the Creator. Â Thus, its real effect comes from the fact that the hymns are centred around God and his love. It is an appreciation and a display of love and gratitude towards the love giving Father! Â 2. Praise is a Divine service whereby we join the cherubim and seraphim in their continuous praise. Thus, we get raised to the same rank of the heavenly Angels. **Â Scope Of Coptic Hymns** The Coptic hymns total above 300 songs, which differ in music, tones and length (in excess of 20 minutes of some). The bulk of them are written in Coptic but few are written in Greek and some of them have been lost or disappeared. Â They are so diverse that only very few could claim absolute mastership of all hymns. **Â Objectives Of The Hymn's Subject** 1. Appreciation of the importance of hymns. 2. Brief introduction to the history and development of hymns. 3. Survey common hymns and their occasions. 4. Learn selected hymns 5. Encourage further studies in hymns beyond this course. Â **References** 1. Deacon's service book (in Coptic) 2. The EBSALMODIA (in Coptic) 3. The book of daily Praise and hourly psalms by Father Matthew 4. Relevant cassettes by the Coptic Theology College in Cairo.