

# HEAVEN ON EARTH



## *Praise in the Coptic Orthodox Church*

Saint George Coptic Orthodox Church  
San Jose, CA  
[www.stgeorgechurch.org](http://www.stgeorgechurch.org)

### ***Praise the Lord!***

In the Church, we find many types of prayers. We find prayers of thanksgiving, glorification, repentance, supplication, and intercession. But above all these, praise is the highest form of prayer.

### ***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 which 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.

In the rest of this article, we will focus on the praises of vespers and matins, leaving a more in-depth study of the Midnight Praise to a later time.

### ***Vespers Praise***

Vespers Praise occurs before the start of the Raising of Evening Incense (Vespers), celebrated the evening before the Divine Liturgy.

On days without fast, as well as days without fasts of strict abstinence<sup>1</sup> throughout the year, the ninth, eleventh, and twelfth hours of the Agpeya are prayed before the start of

Vespers Praise. On days of fasts with strict abstinence, such as Wednesdays, Fridays, and the weekdays of longer periods of fast (e.g. Advent) when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated later in the day, only the eleventh and twelfth hours of the Agpeya are prayed before the start of Vespers Praise.

Vespers Praise follows this order:

1. **Psalm 116** – the shortest of the psalms serves as a fitting introduction to this service of praise. All nations and peoples are called to praise God for His mercy and truth.
2. **The Fourth Ode<sup>2</sup>** – 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.
3. **The Psali (ψαλι) 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 Vespers Praise of Saturday evening, for instance, the *Psali* focuses on the name of the Lord Jesus as the congregation chants the refrain, “O my Lord Jesus Christ, my Good Savior.”
4. **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 **ΛΟΒΨ** (*loavsh*), or ‘explanation.’ This part explains the symbols of Saint Mary previously mentioned in the *Theotokia*.

5. **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’

**ΑΔΑΜ** (*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.

**ΠΙΒΑΤΟΣ** (*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.

#### Matins Praise

Matins Praise takes place before the start of the Raising of Morning Incense (Matins), on the morning of the Divine Liturgy. Matins Praise simply consists of the Morning

Doxology and the Conclusion of the *Adam Theotokias*. Before the start of this praise, the First Hour of the Agpeya is prayed.

In the Morning Doxology, we glorify God in His saints and ask for their intercessions. This hymn also contains parts from the psalms that express our joy and thanks for passing the night in peace and rising in the morning to praise God. In this service, we truly praise with the heavenly Church.

#### 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.

Prayer from “The Gloria”:

*We praise You. We bless You. We serve You. We worship You. We confess to You. We glorify You. We give thanks to You for Your great glory, O Lord, King of heaven, God the Father, the Almighty; O Lord, the one and Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Fasts can be performed with or without strict abstinence. A fast *with* strict abstinence means that one does not eat at all until a certain time of the day. A fast *without* strict abstinence means that one may eat, at any time of the day, food which does *not* contain animal or dairy products. During a fast (such as the Great Lent or Advent), Saturday and Sunday are always considered a day of fast *without* strict abstinence, since Saturday is the original Sabbath of the Lord and Sunday commemorates the joy of the day of the Lord’s resurrection.

<sup>2</sup> The Fourth Ode is also called ‘The Fourth Hoas.’ The Coptic word **ΛΟΒΨ** (*Hoas*) means ‘song’ or ‘praise’.