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## Moral Discernment Through Praxical Pursuit of God

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## Moral Discernment through Praxical Pursuit of God

Stephen M. Meawad, Ph.D.

### *Introduction*

Coptic Orthodox Christians might often be hesitant or even reluctant to speak in terms of ethics, since the language of ethics challenges the integrity between *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*. Generally, Western and Eastern approaches to ethics have had their pros and cons: systematization characteristic of the former has led to deep analyses of complex topics, but it has often fragmented otherwise composite topics that require interdependence for the most accurate assessment. On the other hand, non-fragmentation typical of the latter has preserved the holistic reality that characterizes the complexity of truths, but it has not always allowed for the same depth of analysis as that engaged in western systematic ethics.

The broad field of Coptic Orthodox Christian ethics is characterized most notably by three assertions inextricably linked. The first is the inherent integrative nature of Coptic Orthodox ethics. This perspective maintains that ethics cannot be separated from any other part of life but must be considered as part of a single fabric of life. Most important to this integrity is the unity between ethics or actions, on one hand, and faith or beliefs, on the other. For this reason, many Orthodox Christian ethicists will begin with or at least devote much attention to matters of theology proper (dogmatic theology, sacramental theology, etc.), rooted in Scripture and Patristic texts, when presenting ethical stances. Coptic Orthodox Christians then have a complete integration of theology and ethics, since we conceive of ethics as resulting from the principle task of uniting with God—the second hallmark of Coptic Orthodox ethics.

Uniting with God (Christian ethics) is contingent on knowing God (Christian Theology). The Coptic Orthodox Church is a Trinitarian Church, professing a belief in the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is in keeping with the early Church creedal formula communicated through God’s self-revelation to humanity and recorded through the inspired words of Holy Scripture. It is the Holy Trinity who guides us communally and personally in moral discernment. The Holy Trinity is the central orienting principle by which determinations surrounding good and evil, right and wrong, and virtue and vice are made. More than this, it is the active, dynamic, and unpredictable *pursuit* of God manifested through love for Him and love for neighbor that dictates Coptic Orthodox Christian ethics. The centrality of this pursuit in Orthodox ethics is best understood through the concept of spiritual struggle—the third, and partially overlapping, characteristic of an Orthodox ethic.

Spiritual struggle for the Coptic Orthodox Christian is *persistent*, *sincere*, and *humble*. It is a struggle that is *persistent* and does not relent despite the difficulties that will inevitably arise. Spiritual struggle does not submit to life’s obstacles but recognizes the value of a muscular ethic of exertion that is concomitantly synergistic and grace-enabled. It is *sincere* in its attempt to pursue God, Who is able and desiring to be experienced and known, yet mysterious and unable to be fully grasped. It is a *humble* struggle in its communal model of discipleship to spiritual elders, in its fundamental ecclesiology, and in its submission to the other and to God Himself as the principle Guide on the journey and its very *telos*.

Though not exhaustive, the following components help identify specific sources of the authority for moral discernment in the Coptic Orthodox Church:

### *1. Holy Scripture*

First, the Coptic Orthodox Church regards the Holy Scriptures as fundamental to its ethics in a number of ways. Holy Scripture can first be read for direct ethical instruction. This is especially clear in passages such as those of the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, the Pauline epistles, and a plentitude of other pericope that offer direct exhortations. Holy Scripture is also read among Copts with “spiritual senses,” a hallmark of Alexandrian hermeneutics at least since the time of Origen, the early Church scholar. To read Scripture in this way is to read with a presumption that there often lies a deeper, hidden, spiritual sense under the immediately obvious or literal understanding of the text. There can exist multiple layers and multiple spiritual senses, each underscoring a different truth or the same truth in a more profound way. To access these deeper layers of truth, the Coptic Orthodox Church emphasizes the need for pure and virtuous reading. That is, Holy Scripture functions not only as a source of direct ethical instruction but also as a source of transformation that enables a more profound reading of Scripture, ethically and otherwise. Holy Scripture, then, is an ethic of moral asceticism, according to the Patristic heritage that is formative for Coptic Orthodox worship, theology, and ethics.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the three prominent fourth-century Cappadocians (along with St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil), held that a pure mind was necessary to understand the pure matters of Holy Scripture. As Scripture is pivotal in discerning theological matters, regarding the discussion of theology, he writes:

It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is “dangerous” for the impure to study what is pure. It is only a life of purity that allows a person to most accurately interpret Holy Scripture. Otherwise, one can rely only on intellect and conjecture—each important in their own right, but insufficient without purity. This would render a plethora of opinions and hermeneutical impasses, much as is seen today.

Saint Basil similarly highlights the necessity of “cleansing the eye of the soul” when reading Scripture. He writes, “As the power of seeing is in the healthy eye, so the activity of the Spirit is in the purified soul.”<sup>2</sup> The Holy Spirit, that is, the presumed Author of Scripture, is enlivened in the person who has a purified soul. That person is more apt for Scriptural interpretation, not at the neglect of any other necessary “methods,” but in combination with these elements. It is in harmony with the Holy Spirit, Who purifies all creation, that a person is to grapple in interpreting Scripture.

As an added emphasis, this purity is not attained passively but requires a sort of moral asceticism. In fact, Origen believed that the very difficulty of interpreting Holy Scripture was to point towards the need for this moral asceticism in the exercise of interpretation. He writes:

The aim [of Holy Scripture] was that not everyone who wished should have these mysteries laid before his feet to trample upon...but that they should be for the man who had devoted himself to the studies of this kind with the utmost purity and sobriety and through nights of vigils, by which means perchance he might be able to trace out the deeply hidden meaning of the Spirit of God, concealed under the language of an ordinary narrative which points in a different direction, and

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Williams Gregory, Lionel R. Wickham, and Gregory, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2002), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

that so he might become a sharer of the Spirit's knowledge and a partaker of His divine counsel.<sup>3</sup>

He continues by describing sacred reading as an intentionally laborious task that requires attention and harmony with God. Holy Scripture cannot be interpreted superficially, but one must struggle with the text wholeheartedly.<sup>4</sup> He continues:

[T]he Divine Wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and interruptions of the historical sense to be found therein, by inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities, in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were present a barrier to the reader and lead him to refuse to proceed along the pathway of the ordinary meaning and so, by shutting us out and debarring us from that, might recall us to the beginning of another way, and might thereby bring us, through the entrance of a narrow footpath, to a higher and loftier road and lay open the immense breadth of the Divine Wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the Patristic emphasis on virtue and purity, other important factors to read Holy Scripture well for ethical guidance include the centrality of Christ as the interpretive key to Scripture, the importance of holistic, typological, and allegorical readings of Scripture, and the need for an intensive, grace-filled, and communal reading of Scripture.

## 2. *Holy Tradition: Apostolicity, Patristics, and Canons*

The Coptic Orthodox Church is *Apostolic*; it was founded through St. Mark, the apostle, evangelist, and martyr. The Church's apostolicity is the foundation of its authority, as the apostles received instruction from the Lord Jesus Christ in His establishment of the Church on earth. Through apostolic succession, the Coptic Orthodox Church preserves its Holy Tradition, theologically, sacramentally, and ethically. The successors of the apostles are the bishops, over which one representative—a head among equal brethren—is given the title “Pope, Patriarch, and Archbishop of the great city and See of Alexandria.” Following the synodality and conciliarity of the early Christian Church, the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which consists of this presider along with all of the bishops, plays an important role in the moral discernment of the Church through frequent gatherings for synodal decisions. In this spirit, the Coptic Church professes the beliefs of the first three Ecumenical Councils, which are authoritative regarding the doctrines of the Church. From these and other local synodal councils, most notably in the first four centuries of Christendom, the Coptic Orthodox Church also recognizes the canons as guidelines for moral discernment.

Additionally, the writings of the early Church Fathers, factor in prominently to the moral and spiritual cultivation of Coptic hierarchy and laity. Patristic texts from the United (Catholic) Church before the Council of Chalcedon, in addition to other non-Chalcedonian Fathers after the schism, are very much responsible for the moral discernment, Scriptural exegesis, and liturgical, intellectual, and spiritual formation of Coptic Orthodox Christians until this day. It should be noted, however, that historically and contemporarily, the Coptic Orthodox Church has refrained from decreeing official ethical proclamations, as the static nature of such an endeavor would be counteractive to the dynamic nature of fluctuating circumstances that often decorate ethical

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<sup>3</sup> Origen, John C. Cavadini, and Henri de Lubac, *On First Principles* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Christian Classics, 2013), 374, *slightly edited*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 378-79, *slightly edited*.

conundrums. Instead, the Church has often left the delegation of specific matters of moral discernment to the local bishop, who oversees parish priests within his diocese. The bishop is given some latitude in applying the canons within different circumstances or situations. The guidelines are in place through theological tenets, and the minutiae are addressed through a spirit of love, compassion, and openness to the Holy Spirit of Truth and Wisdom.

### 3. *Divine Liturgy*

Coptic Orthodox worship consists of numerous components, including Evening and Morning Raising of Incense, the Offertory, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Faithful, the Distribution of the Holy Mysteries, the Daily Book of the Hours (*Agpeya*), and the Midnight Praises, among others. The worship of the Coptic Church, similar to the early Christian Church, is centered around the Divine Liturgy of the Eucharist. As a transformative practice for Coptic Orthodox Christians, it plays a pivotal role in Coptic moral discernment.

The emphasis on the Eucharistic Liturgy is at the same time an emphasis on the power of liturgy to transform its participants into dwelling places of the Divine. The Holy Trinity is present *in* and *at* the meal from the earliest of Christian Eucharistic accounts. This real presence is the source of the transformative nature of the Divine Liturgy. The transformation offered through the liturgy is twofold—one practices grace-enabled struggle to purify oneself in order to be made worthy of receiving the Eucharist, but one also receives a purifying grace *through* the mystery in order to aid in further purification of the participant. As noted above, this process of purification is central to the development of Coptic Orthodox moral discernment.

St. John Chrysostom, a late fourth-century monk and archbishop of Constantinople, notes both of these junctures in the process of transformation. In his first instruction to the catechumens, he writes:

One who is about to approach those sacred rites and awesome mysteries ought to be alert and wide-awake, cleansed of every earthly care, abundantly filled with temperance and zeal. He should banish from his mind every thought which is foreign to the mysteries and should make his house clean and ready in every respect, just as if he were about to receive the emperor under his roof. That is the way to prepare your mind, such are the thoughts you should think, such should be the purpose of your will.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in homily 46 on the Gospel of St. John, he warns his reader of the dangers of approaching the Holy Body and Precious Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ without purity of body and conscience. Otherwise, he maintains, that person would be just as guilty as those who nailed Christ to the Cross.<sup>7</sup> If this were not extreme enough of an expression, in section 6 of Homily 82 on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, he asserts that partaking of the mysteries while openly

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<sup>6</sup>John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, translated by Paul W. Harkins, Ancient Christian Writers (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1962), 134.

<sup>7</sup>John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John, Translated, with Notes and Indices*, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Division of the East and West, Vol. II, Hom. XLII-LXXXVIII (London: Oxford, J.H. Parker, 1848), 401.

and unrepentantly in sin is worse than demon possession.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to claim that he would rather give up his own life than have someone receive the mysteries in this manner.<sup>9</sup>

Such intensity of language is a direct reflection of the transformative nature of participation in the Eucharist. Chrysostom exclaims:

This Blood is the salvation of our souls, by This the soul is washed, by This is beautified, by This is inflamed, This causes our understanding to be more bright than fire, and our soul more beaming than gold; this Blood was poured forth, and made heaven accessible...They who share this Blood stand with Angels and Archangels and the Powers that are above, clothed in Christ's own kingly robe, and having the armor of the Spirit. Nay, I have not as yet said any great thing: they are clothed with the King Himself.<sup>10</sup>

From the perspective of Coptic Orthodox Christians, it is through the gathering of the community of believers, the Church, at the Divine Liturgy that one attains the purity that is needed in order to reach the ultimate goal of the moral life—unity with God. In this way, the liturgy and the formation of moral discernment are inextricably linked.

### *Conclusion*

To summarize, moral discernment in the Coptic Church depends on our understanding of God, the Holy Trinity; our struggle-filled, transformative, praxical pursuit of unity with God, which sharpens the spiritual senses and thus moral discernment; our intimacy with, guidance by, and formation through a virtuous, intensive, grace-filled, holistic, typological, allegorical, and communal reading of Holy Scripture; the Holy Tradition, which includes the Coptic Orthodox Church's Apostolicity, Patristic heritage, and conciliar canons; and Divine Liturgy, a transformative practice that has always been central to Christian identity, that continues to be central for Coptic Orthodox identity, and that functions as a vehicle for God's Divine indwelling within each member of His Body and Church.

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<sup>8</sup> John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Translated, with Notes and Indices*, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Division of the East and West, Vol. III, Hom. LIX-XC (London: Oxford, J.H. Parker, 1851), 1093.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1094.

<sup>10</sup> Chrysostom, *Gospel of John*, 400-401, *slightly edited*.