

# The Letter of the Month

of St. Antonious and St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church

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## A Study of the Readings of the Coptic New Year

### The Old Man – The New Nature – With the New Year

The Readings of the Feast of El-Nayrouz:

*Evening:* Psalm 96:1-2; Matthew 12:44-53

*Morning:* Psalm 98:1; Mark 2:18-22

*Pauline:* 2 Cor. 5:11-6:12

*Catholic:* 1 John 2:7-17

*Acts:* Acts 17:16-24

*Liturgy:* Psalm 65:11; 81:1; Luke 4:14-30

With the beginning of the New Year, each person, each family, and the whole Church should consider what the end of one year and the beginning of a New Year mean.

Each one should look back on his life in the past year and evaluate what he has achieved and what remains to be achieved, then begin a new phase. Here, the church offers a set of readings from the chapters of the Bible as a guide throughout our lives to help us on earth, year after year.

In these readings, we learn about:

1- The Old Man

2- The New Nature

3- The New Life

#### THE OLD MAN

In the Liturgy Gospel of the first day of the New Year, St. Luke presents an event that took place at the beginning of Christ's service. After the Temptation, the Lord taught in the synagogues, and, "*He came to Nazareth where He was brought up, and, as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day*" (Luke 4:16). He looked before Him at the faces he used to see in the town, in the houses, and in the synagogue. What did He find? What He read in "*the eyes of all who were fixed on Him*" (Luke 4:20) was written in the book that was handed to Him to read. Isaiah spoke of the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. This was how Jesus saw Man.

But why would this be the condition of these people when they took care to regularly attend devotions at the synagogue, hear the chapters of the Scripture, and worship God? How can it be that diligence in religious observance did not change their lives?

There are other people of whom today's chapter of the Acts speaks to us, and although there is a great difference between the religion of the Athenians and that of the people of Nazareth, what Paul said about the former applies to the latter, to a very large extent. Paul saw that the people of Athens, "*in all things...are very religious*" (Acts 17:22) but that, in fact, they feared God without knowing Him. They worshipped an unknown God (Acts 17:23). Man's ignorance of his God and of himself makes him poor, brokenhearted, captive, blind, and oppressed.

Often, we come to church, read the Bible, receive communion, and come very close to God; in fact, He is in our midst like He was in the synagogue in the town of Nazareth.

Yet we do not benefit from His presence, and, like the people of Nazareth, Jesus "*...then passing through the midst of them...went His way (Luke 4:30).*" A person often sits sad and dejected, just as is accurately described by Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians. He considers himself unknown, dying, chastened, killed, sorrowful, and poor, having nothing (2 Cor. 5:9-10). He does not know that the promise is close to him: that it is within him. He does not know that the One Who can save us "*is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being...We are also his offspring*" (Acts 17:28).

Does every Christian here, in this church, realize the depth of the power, joy, and triumph hidden in his heart? Each one here was immersed in Baptism, chrismated with the Holy Myron, received communion of the holy Body and precious Blood. He became a member of the Body of Christ: a child of God and brother of His Son. He died with Christ and rose. Yet we live the life of the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. Each lives unknown, dying, chastened, killed, sorrowful, and poor, as having nothing and afflicted. Why is this?

It is because of ignorance of the treasures hidden deep within him: treasures of rejoicing, riches, freedom, knowledge, joy, and honor. Due to this ignorance, he lives "*in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes*" (1 John 2:11), as John the apostle said.

The affliction and darkness increase and an evil and cruel force controls man's spirit and it becomes full of idols (Acts 17:16, 29), made and invented by man when he closes his eyes as he becomes ignorant of what is deep within him and of his true nature, his relationship with his Loving God, and of what God has done for him. The worship of the Unknown God (Acts 17:23) who is far yet near, awesome yet loving, kind and compassionate, makes man truly afflicted, brokenhearted, sad, poor, and oppressed.

#### THE NEW NATURE

How can Man overcome this situation? The Holy Bible shows where it began and what happened to Adam, the first Man, the head of the human race. Man's nature and the actual conditions of his daily life confirm his status as poor, brokenhearted, miserable, and afflicted. A change is therefore imperative – in nature and in behavior. Thus God devised a plan to give Man a new beginning, a Head for the race of man, a Deputy, a Prototype, and a Way. The former head was the first Adam, and the Word Incarnate was the second Adam.

The Son of God did not know the sin of Adam and his children, but God's plan was that Christ should carry this sin and die that it may die with Him, and that the old human race should die with Him, so that when He rose, it would be a new beginning. "*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him...For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus, that if One died for all, then all died and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again*"

(2 Cor. 5:21, 14, 15). Thus, what is written in Isaiah was truly fulfilled. This is the joyful message defining His mission on earth: He became Man and His Father dealt with Him as such so that Man may, through Him, become capable of participating in the Divine nature and overstep his situation as poor, brokenhearted, and afflicted.

He says:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me,  
To preach the Gospel to the poor,  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”  
(Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1, 2)

First, how can He who gives the Spirit and anoints others with it become Himself anointed and say, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me?*” The answer, in the words of St. Athanasius, is as though the Lord is saying:

“I, the Word of God, give Myself – having become Man – the Spirit, and, having become Man, I sanctify Myself in Humanity so that all may be sanctified in Me (St. Athanasius, Against the Arians (C.Ar) I, 45, NPNF 2, 4). It is not the Word, in His capacity as Word and Wisdom, which is anointed in Him and by Him” (C.Ar I, 46).

Thus, we were all in Him – in His Body and He, Jesus Christ, remains the same: yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) – with no change. At the same time, He gives and He takes: as the Word of God, He gives, and as a Man, He takes. It is not the Word, in His capacity as the Word God, Who advances because all things are His at all times, but men who, in Him and through Him, come to the beginning of their lives (C.Ar I, 47). Whatever the Father gives, He grants through the Son. It is truly wonderful and strange that the grace granted by the Son is from the Father and is also the grace which is said to have been obtained by the Son. Again, it is said that the glory which the Son gives is also from the Father and that the Son Himself was glorified by it; because, being the Son of God, He Himself became the Son of Man...As the Word, He gives from the Father and as the Son of Man, it is said of Him as of human beings that he obtains what is given to Him (C.Ar I, 48). Thus, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Man, through his affiliation to the Body of Christ and unity with Him, and he becomes anointed. “For when we say that He was anointed in human form, we are anointed in Him... The Savior clarifies this matter further when He says: ‘*And the glory which You gave me I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one*’” (C.Ar I, 48, John 17:22).

Just as He created man – Adam – at the very beginning, in the image of the Word, mankind may be freed in Him, the Second Adam: “This is the mystery of the anointment which occurred to Him and the mystery of the presence of the Incarnate Word which the psalmist saw before and glorified, first, His divinity and His Sovereignty with the Father saying, ‘*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom*’, He then proclaims His coming down to us: ‘*Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than*

*Your companions*’” (C.Ar I, 49, Ps. 45:6).

So, in all these sayings, and when Christ says: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me,*” the reason is that He became flesh, that it may become clear to us from all these words: It is we who need the grace of the Spirit to sanctify us. So through whom should the Spirit be given, and by whom, except through the Son, Who, by Him, has the Spirit? We were only ready to accept the Spirit when the Word became Flesh. Our receiving of the Holy Spirit was confirmed when He said that He was anointed by the Spirit in the flesh, for the flesh was first sanctified in Him. When He said that, as Man, He obtained the Spirit on behalf of Man, He became the seal of the grace of the Spirit which we receive “*...of His fullness*” (John 1:6, C.Ar I, 50).

Thus Jesus became the bodily beginning of the new human race – He became the “Second Adam,” and just as man went on with his life after Adam, in the image of the first Adam – poor, miserable, captive, and dejected – he begins a new phase with his connection to the Second Adam – in the image of the Second Adam: “*For, as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive...The first man Adam became a living being, The last Adam became a life-giving spirit...The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven*” (1 Cor. 15:22, 45, 47).

We unite with this new Head of the human race by faith, love, and obedience. In fact, unity comes through physical participation also: through the sacraments – by communion of His Body and Blood. He becomes a special beginning for the personal life of every believer in Him. Hence, the words of the apostle: “*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be My People’*” (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:15; 2 Cor. 6:16). We can therefore understand the words of the apostle when he said: “*And they glorified God in me*” (Gal. 1:24) and the hymn sung by the church in Psalm 150: “*Praise God in all His saints.*” According to St Athanasius, the reason for all the preceding is our connection to His body (C.Ar I, 48), for we have obtained all the merits of the body of Christ Himself.

“*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new...that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again*” (2 Cor. 5:17, 15). This new creation is incorruptible because, through the Incarnation, it is associated with the Divine Nature which cannot be changed or altered.

Thus, in Christ, the poor receive good tidings, the broken hearted healing, the captives liberty, the blind recover their sight, and the oppressed are set free. In Christ, man’s life becomes the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> Outwardly, the Christian may appear unknown, persecuted, and poor, but deep in his heart is knowledge, life, joy, and riches. True Christians live “*as unknown and yet well-knowing, as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing all things*” (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

A Christian knows his nature, i.e. where he comes from, whose child he is, who is his God, the riches and treasures hidden in him; he knows that he no longer worships an unknown God because all things are now known to him. With Paul, he says: “*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord*” (2 Cor. 5:11). There is no longer room for darkness, or the worship of idols, because we know that

we have become united with this God who created the universe and everything in it. This is the Lord of heaven and earth – He gives to all life, breath and all things – He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being, for we are also His offspring.” He sent His Son in the likeness of man that, through Him, He might grant the beginning of a new life in the anointing of the Spirit, and “*He has appointed a day on which He shall judge the world in righteousness by the Man Whom He has ordained. He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead*” (Acts 17:24-31).

When man finds this knowledge and when it sinks into the depth of his being, he acquires an inner power that changes him and grants him renewed life, constant resurrection. His heart is filled with joy and he truly feels that he has found a complete and priceless treasure. He is aware of a new creation coming to life within him – one pearl of great price (see Matt. 13:46) – and he immediately gives up his whole past and attaches himself to the source of this new life, its guide, model, and the source of all its power, renewal and anointing. “*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field*” (Matt. 13:44) and, “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it*” (Matt. 13:45-46).

“You are surrounded by the Cherubim and the Seraphim and they cannot see You. We look at You every day upon the altar and we partake of Your Body and Your honored Blood. This is the true pearl that is of great price, which the merchant sold all that he had and bought. Leave now for us this pearl to shine upon us, in our inner being. The beauty of our souls and the joy of our hearts is Your holy Name, O My Lord Jesus”  
(Monday Psali).

May this New Year be the beginning of the acceptable year for the life of the new creation, in which we care to protect the precious treasure of life, the pearl of the honored anointment and sing a new song in joy and rejoicing.

*“Oh, sing to the Lord a new song!*

*Sing to the Lord, all the earth,*

*Sing to the Lord, bless His name,*

*Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day”*

(Ps. 96:1-2)

*“Oh, sing to the Lord a new song!*

*For He has done marvelous things;*

*His right hand and His holy arm has gained them victory”*

(Ps. 98:1).

*“You crown the year with Your goodness and Your paths drip with abundance”* (Ps. 65:17)

### THE NEW LIFE

When Jesus sat among those present in the congregation of his town, Nazareth, He saw in their eyes that were fixed on Him the monotony of a repetitious religious life, which is the most serious thing that can endanger man’s relationship with His God, a life where innovation fades and neglect sets in so that, in such a life, Christ is like a prophet in his homeland, an ordinary person of no esteem (Luke 4:22; Matt. 13:54-58).

Man stumbles upon Christ: prayer and church

attendance, even communion, become a daily or weekly task in which the soul is not deeply moved, inwardly. Little by little, a person forgets the work of grace and ignorance surrounds his mind and heart. The voice of the conscience fades and he begins to walk in darkness without realizing it, worshipping an unknown god, unaware of the precious treasure within him – “*not corruptible goods of silver and gold but by the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without spot*” (1 Pet. 1:19).

Sometimes, things reach the point of disregard, as happened with Paul in Athens, when the teacher becomes a “babbler” (Acts 17:18) and some “begin to mock” (Acts 17:32) saying “Physician heal yourself.” Sometimes there is a genuine attempt to kill the conscience and extinguish the work of grace. This is what happened with the people of Nazareth when the Lord spoke in their midst (Luke 4:23): “*So all in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff*” (Luke 4:29).

Other times, religious life turns into a desire moved by curiosity; the reading from the Acts offers an example of this, when it describes the people of Athens who “*spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing*” (Acts 17:21).

On the other hand, some may think of religious life as bigotry: narrow-mindedness that generates protest and discontent. The result is that the time passes, from the beginning of the year to its end. So what did Jesus do? “*Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way;*” “*He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief*” (Matt. 13:58). According to the Acts, Paul also “*departed from among them*” (Acts 17:33).

A true Christian experiences what the prophet Jeremiah said about the Lord’s work: “*Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning*” (Lam. 3:22-23). The first day of the year may be a good and useful opportunity to experience this new life. It is a day on which a person stands between two stages: the old and the new. God offers a gift at the beginning of the New Year – a new life...the gift of the new year is the hidden treasure – the precious pearl, the anointment of the Spirit coming from him, the good news, joy, riches, and an open heart.

On this day, a person’s heart may sometimes be filled with many yearnings, and his spirit may dream of hopes and wish they may come true in the coming year. He wishes that the troubles and pains of the previous year may go away and be replaced by sweet and joyful days. God offers all this today. Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. “*In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation*” (2 Cor. 6:2).

To the bigots and the troubled people who make things difficult for others, Paul says: “*Our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open*” (2 Cor. 6:11-12).

Today, God offers all this, within the framework of reconciliation: “*Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

God now commands all people, everywhere, to repent, as He disregards the ages of ignorance. Thus, the coming year truly

becomes “the acceptable year of the Lord” in which man abandons his old life to obtain a new life – like the man who sold all he had – his old life – to obtain the treasure of grace of the new life, or like the tradesman who went and sold all that he owned and bought one pearl of great price – the anointment of the Spirit.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment...and no one puts new wine into old wineskins...But new wine must be put into new wineskins” (Mark 2:21-22).

It is a new life in a new year in which man begins to “bring out of his treasure things new and old” (Matt. 13:52). In the New Year, the Lord wants that as “...He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” Christians are called “...ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20) who offer an example of the life which He guarantees for believers.

“In all things,” Christians show themselves “...as ministers of God” (2 Cor. 6:4).

In this respect, Paul the apostle presents a list of what these people can do and bear to complete their service and fulfill their mission:

“...in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fasting, by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and by good report” (2 Cor. 6:4-8).

Some may see them, on the outside, as unknown, sorrowful, or poor, but within them there is hope, truth, life, joy, and riches (2 Cor. 6:9-10). With the New Year come good tidings for all: For the children: forgiveness of sins for His name’s sake. For the fathers: knowledge of Him who is from the beginning. For the young men: strength, victory over the wicked one and that the word of the Lord may abide in them (1 John 2:12-14).

“He who says He is in the light and hates His brother is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause of stumbling in him; but he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness and does not know where he is going, because the blindness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:11).

This year will also pass, and the following year, until the end of ages comes.

“Again the kingdom of God is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, and which, when it was full, they drew to shore and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just and cast them in to the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of

teeth” (Matt. 13:47-50).

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man Whom He has ordained, He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

“Do not love the world or the things in the world...For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

Before the priest and the deacons begin the “Service of Reconciliation” – the service of the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy – they put on white robes. They do this on behalf of all the people, as all these enter the service in their original clothing: the garments of baptism – the day they joined the body of Christ and obtained the anointment of the Holy Spirit, in Him and by Him. With these white robes, the whole Church joins “those who have victory over the beast, those who stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes singing the hymn of Moses, the servant of God and the hymn of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9).

The hymn of Moses is the praise of the crossing which Moses said with God’s people when they crossed the Red Sea. It is the First Canticle (*hoos*): “Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord and spoke saying: ‘I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously...’” This hymn of praise was said in olden times as a symbol and sign of the true triumph, the crossing from the old life to the new.

With the start of the New Year, let us go back to our first garments and renew the pledge we made on the day we were baptized in the death of Christ and His resurrection. Let us hold fast to the rank and honor we attained through our union with the Body of the Son of God and obtained, from Him and through Him reconciliation and good tidings, joy, and the New Life.

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 25, which speaks of the Jubilee year mentioned by Isaiah. Leviticus commands that: “You shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants...It shall be holy to you”...With Christ, every year has become a Jubilee year, a holy year.

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