**Coptic Orthodox Church**

**Overview of the Coptic Church Denomination**

By [Jack Zavada](http://christianity.about.com/od/singlesresources/p/biojackzavada.htm)

The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the oldest branches of Christianity, claiming to be founded by one of the 72 [apostles](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/Apostle.htm) sent forth by [Jesus Christ](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentpeople/p/jesuschrist.htm).

The word "Coptic" is derived from a Greek term meaning "Egyptian."

At the Council of Chalcedon, the Coptic Church split from other Christians around the Mediterranean, in a disagreement over the true nature of Christ.

Today, Coptic Christians can be found in many countries throughout the world, including a large number in the United States.

**Number of Worldwide Members:**

Estimates of Coptic Church members worldwide vary widely, between 10 million to 60 million people.

**Founding of the Coptic Church:**

Copts trace their roots to [John Mark](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentpeople/fl/John-Mark.htm), who they say was among the 72 disciples sent forth by Jesus, as recorded in [Luke 10:1](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2010:1&version=NIV). He was also the author of the [Gospel of Mark](http://christianity.about.com/od/newtestamentbooks/qt/gospelmarkintro.htm). Mark's missionary work in Egypt occurred some time between 42-62 A.D.

Egyptian religion had long believed in eternal life. One pharaoh, Akhenaten, who reigned in 1353-1336 B.C., even tried to introduce [monotheism](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/egypt/a/locegyptmonothe.htm).

The Roman Empire, which governed Egypt when the church was growing there, vigorously [persecuted](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/JZ-Persecution.htm) Coptic Christians. In 451 A.D., the Coptic Church split from the [Roman Catholic Church](http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/catholichistory.htm) due to the Coptic belief that Christ is one united nature stemming from two natures, divine and human "without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration" (from the Coptic divine liturgy). In contrast, Catholics, [Eastern Orthodox](http://christianity.about.com/od/easternorthodoxy/a/orthodoxhistory.htm) and Protestants believe Christ is one person who shares two distinct natures, the human and divine.

About 641 A.D., the Arab conquest of Egypt began. From that time, many Copts converted to Islam. Restrictive laws were passed in Egypt over the centuries to oppress Copts, but today some 9 million members of the Coptic Church in Egypt live in relative harmony with their Muslim brothers.

The Coptic Orthodox Church was one of the charter members of the [World Council of Churches](http://www.oikoumene.org/) in 1948.

**Prominent Founders of the Coptic Church:**

St. Mark (John Mark)

**Geography:**

Copts are found in Egypt, England, France, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Brazil, Australia, several countries in Africa and Asia, Canada, and the United States.

**Coptic Church Governing Body:**

The Pope of Alexandria is the leader of Coptic clergy, and about 90 bishops head dioceses throughout the world. As the Coptic Orthodox Holy Synod, they meet regularly on matters of [faith](http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/g/faith.htm) and leadership. Below the bishops are priests, who must be married, and who carry out the pastoral work. A Coptic Lay Council, elected by congregants, serves as liaison between the church and government, while a joint lay-clerical committee manages the Coptic Church's endowments in Egypt.

**Sacred or Distinguishing Text:**

The Bible, the Liturgy of St. Basil.

**Notable Coptic Church Ministers and Members:**

Pope Tawadros II, Boutros Boutros Ghali, U.N. Secretary 1992-97; Dr. Magdy Yacoub, world famous [heart surgeon](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Church.htm).

**Coptic Church Beliefs and Practices:**

Copts believe in seven [sacraments](http://www.gotquestions.org/ordinances-sacraments.html): [baptism](http://christianity.about.com/od/faqhelpdesk/f/whatisbaptism.htm), confirmation, confession ([penance](http://catholicism.about.com/od/thesacraments/g/Penance.htm)), Eucharist ([communion](http://christianity.about.com/od/faqhelpdesk/f/whatiscommunion.htm)), matrimony, [ordination](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Church.htm), and unction of the sick. Baptism is conducted on infants, with the baby being completely immersed in water three times.

While the Coptic Church forbids worship of saints, it does teach that they intercede for the faithful. It teaches [salvation](http://christianity.about.com/od/conversion/p/salvation.htm) through the [death and resurrection](http://christianity.about.com/od/faqhelpdesk/a/whyjesushad2die.htm) of [Jesus Christ](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Church.htm). Copts practice [fasting](http://christianity.about.com/od/whatdoesthebiblesay/a/spiritualfasting.htm); 210 days out of the year are considered fast days. The church also relies heavily on tradition, and its members venerate [icons](http://www.firstimageicons.com/Coptic_Iconography.html).

Copts and Roman Catholics share many beliefs. Both churches teach works of merit. Both celebrate the [mass](http://catholicism.about.com/od/worship/p/The_Mass.htm).

For more about what Coptic Orthodox Christians believe visit [Coptic Orthodox Church Beliefs](http://christianity.about.com/od/Coptic-Orthodoxy/a/JZ-Coptic-Christian-Beliefs.htm) or [www.copticchurch.net](http://www.copticchurch.net/).

(Sources: [www.stmarkboston.org](http://www.stmarkboston.org/), [www.st-takla.org](http://st-takla.org/Coptic-church-1.html), [gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org/Coptic-Christianity.html), and [copticchurch.net](http://copticchurch.net/))

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