

The brotherly embrace of Patriarch Tawadros II and Pope Francis

The Trusted Path of Friendship

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The Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, Tawadros II, who also bears the title of 'Pope,' was in Rome from the 9th to the 14th of May this year. Three moments of his visit can be seen as "milestones" for ecumenism.

The first moment was the celebration of the *Christological Consensus between the Catholic and the Coptic Orthodox Churches*, signed on the 10th of May 1973 by Pope Paul VI and the Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III.¹ This agreement had an important precedent – in 1968 the Church of Rome returned St Mark's relics to the Egyptian Church. The agreement then served as a model for many bilateral Christological agreements signed by the Catholic Church and each of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in subsequent years. Having recognized the first three Ecumenical Councils, these Churches lived at a distance from other Churches for fifteen centuries. But toward the late 20th century, new life sprang forth and concrete ways of reconciliation and real cooperation emerged.

A second milestone which was evident during the same general audience on the 10th of May was in the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the *Day of Friendship*, inaugurated in 2013² during Pope Tawadros II's visit to Rome in the period following the respective elections of both Pope Francis' and Pope Tawadros. It was a visit that strengthened bonds of friendship and fraternity.

The third crucial moment was a common prayer in the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel in the Apostolic Palace that sealed the ecumenism of suffering and of blood. As the blood of the martyrs has always been the seed of the Church's strength and fruitfulness, the sharing of daily suffering becomes an effective instrument of unity and allows forgiveness, reconciliation and peace to spring forth. All remember the 21 Copts beheaded in Libya on February 15, 2015, victims of Islamic extremism. The May 11th agreement between Patriarch Tawadros and Pope Francis also recognized them as martyrs of the Catholic Church, with

¹ Joint Declaration of the Holy Father Paul VI and His Holiness Pope Amba Shenouda III, May 10, 1973. See www.vatican.va.

² Cf. Address of the Holy Father Pope Francis to His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, May 10, 2013. See www.vatican.va.

Francis having already asserted in 2017 that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of unity. The martyrs are united in heaven, they were not killed because they were Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, but because they were Christians'.

The Patriarch's visit included a pilgrimage to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, also to the Colosseum and a private audience with Pope Francis. Finally, on May 14th, the Patriarch celebrated the Divine Liturgy with his own faithful, numerous in Italy, in the Basilica of St John Lateran. Use of the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome was allowed, considering the historic nature of the visit, as a fraternal gesture toward the Coptic Church, which has the same belief in the Eucharist as the Catholic Church, and in light of the spiritual bonds uniting the Sees of Peter and of Mark.