

## The Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches

# A Tested and Rediscovered Friendship

Mervat Kelli

For eleven years, Pope Francis and the Coptic Orthodox Pope, Tawadros II, have woven a deep fraternal relationship. Already from the time of Pope John Paul II and Pope Shenouda III, there had been lively contact, especially when John Paul II, at the beginning of his February 2000 Jubilee pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, wanted to visit Shenouda III in Cairo, marking the first visit of a bishop of Rome to the Coptic Orthodox patriarch.

Tawadros II, elected in 2012 after the 41 years of the pontificate of Shenouda III, made his first visit abroad to Rome in May 2013, on the 40th anniversary of that of his predecessor. During that occasion, Tawadros II proposed to Pope Francis to forge a close perennial spiritual bond of friendship in Christ. Since then, May 10 is the *Day of Friendship between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church*. Pope Tawadros II was the first Coptic Orthodox Patriarch to attend the enthronement of a Coptic Catholic Patriarch – Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak -- in January 2013 and promoted the creation of a National Council of Christian Churches in Egypt in February 2013.

In April 2017, Pope Francis went to Egypt. During his visit with Pope Tawadros II, they signed a new Joint Declaration of a pastoral nature. It expressed, among other things, both the hope to find a common date for the Easter celebration, and not to repeat baptisms administered in the respective Churches. Further conversation with Pope Francis followed in July 2018, when Pope Tawadros II participated in the meeting of reflection and prayer for peace in the Middle East organized in Bari (Italy).

Then, this past year, controversy arose following release of the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* of the Catholic Church. It created consternation in the Coptic Church, so much so that the Holy Synod of the Coptic Church, on March 7, 2024, issued a Declaration reiterating the rejection of ‘so-called homosexual marriage’. According to some, the Church must not put its head in the sand as if these situations did not exist but face them with courage. Others wondered what the blessing of homosexual couples is for. Is it to heal their relationships and help in a return to the Church, or is it so that those blessed might have their souls at peace and say the Church has blessed us?

On May 22, 2024, Pope Tawadros II received Card. Victor Fernandez, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Cardinal brought the greetings of Pope Francis, recalling the various meetings that took place and in particular Pope Tawadros' last visit to the Vatican on May 10, 2023. On this occasion, the 50th anniversary of the bilateral joint Christological agreement signed by Pope Shenouda III and Pope Paul VI was celebrated, as well as the tenth year of the annual day of Friendship.

The meeting between the cardinal and Pope Tawadros II focused on *Fiducia supplicans*. After recalling that both in *Fiducia supplicans* and the subsequent Doctrinal Declaration of the Dicastery, *Dignitas infinita*, it is reiterated that marriage is only a union between a man and a woman open to the transmission of life, Card. Fernandez confirmed that the Catholic Church is also opposed to same-sex marriage, and therefore shares the teachings of the Declaration of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Church of March 7.

He also clarified that union between people is not blessed. If they come together, they bless the people, making a sign of the cross on each one and adding a short prayer. But this must take place in a brief, spontaneous way, without any rite, without liturgical vestments and without any external manifestation that could confuse that blessing as a marriage. These types of simple, spontaneous and pastoral blessings, explained the Cardinal, can also be imparted on the street, on pilgrimages, and be received by everyone, in whatever condition they find themselves. In fact, in this case it is not a question of 'sanctifying grace,' but of those aids of the Holy Spirit that Catholics call 'actual graces', pushing the sinner towards conversion and maturation.

For his part, Pope Tawadros II explained to Fernández the *historical, cultural and societal ethos of the Egyptian people*.

The cardinal also shared that he had provided a comprehensive clarification on this issue in a detailed letter, as requested by the Oriental Orthodox Church delegation, in the Committee for Dialogue with the Catholic Church, held in January 2024.

At the conclusion, Pope Tawadros II asked the cardinal to bring his greetings of love and appreciation to His Holiness Pope Francis.

This served as a witness to many of how sincere relationships of friendship also help to overcome inevitable challenges and difficulties.