

**Pro Oriente**  
**Report on Coptic Church about**  
**changes, challenges and ecumenical highlights**

Your Grace, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Since we last met, two years ago, many changes have taken place on the Coptic front. With the majority of the events, presumably, aiming at cementing the unity between the Coptic and Catholic Church. At the same time, these developments have produced some challenges that can impede or delay the desired unity.

After the historical visit of his Holiness Pope Tawadros the second to his Holiness Pope Francis at the Vatican in 2013, which was Pope Tawadros' first international trip after his elevation to the see of St Mark, the two Popes have agreed to consider the date of their meeting (the 10<sup>th</sup> of May), which coincides with the date of the meeting between Pope Shenouda the third and Pope Paul the sixth in 1973, as an annual event titled the 'Day of Fraternal Love', which they dedicate for mutual prayers for the promotion of the unity and love between the two Churches.

On May 10<sup>th</sup> 2016, the meeting of 'Fraternal Love' took place for the first time at the Papal Center at the monastery of Saint Bishoy in Egypt, where Pope Tawadros invited his Beatitude the Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac, Patriarch of Catholic Copts in Egypt, Monseigneur Bruno Mowazaro the Apostolic nuncio in Egypt and many Bishops representing the two sides. In his speech Pope Tawadros, sent a message to his Holiness Pope Francis saying: " I am glad that the solidity of the relationship between us is moving from strength to strength year after year, and the openness of heart and thoughts is growing. It is this which is our work to do in love for the One Christ who gathers us and prepares the way for unity and full communion among the members of His Holy Body in His blessed Church."

The Apostolic nuncio then delivered the message of his Holiness Pope Francis saying:

“Although we still aspire for the day where we will be gathered around the same Eucharistic table, we are now able to manifest the communion that gathers us. We can testify together, as Copts and Catholics, to values such as Holiness, dignity of life for each human being, and sacredness of marriage and family life.” Then he added: “We will see more clearly that what unites us outweighs what parts us from each other.”

The honoring of Jesuit Father Henri Boulad then took place as a sign of the gratitude of the Coptic Church for his services in the field of ministering to the young people of Egypt.

Moreover, several ecumenical sessions have been held this year in Armenia between the two churches. I presume that some problems have been solved during these sessions. I believe that some of you took part in this dialogue.

Furthermore, last year the heads of the two Churches have met in Egypt on several occasions, which were characterized by a general feeling of fraternity and love. The main objective of these meetings was to enhance the love and understanding between the leaders of the two Churches.

Moreover, his Holiness Pope Francis has introduced a new tradition during his visit to the Patriarch of the Catholic Church in Egypt for the felicitation of Christmas, where he had accompanied a big group of children with him in order to lift the barrier of fear and alienation between believers, and to accentuate Christian love as the real tie which links us together.

As for the most significant event which recently took place, his Holiness Pope Francis visited Egypt and met with his Holiness Pope Tawadros on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2017. The meeting was characterized by the following:

First, the two Popes held a private session where both showed a conformity on their views concerning the unity of the Church. They agreed on the necessity to persevere in their pursuit toward achieving that unity, which is embodied in the desire and prayer of Jesus Himself, as well as the desire of Christendom and its longing to achieving it soon.

Secondly, they both signed a Common Declaration, similar to the Common Declaration signed by Pope Shenouda III and Pope Paul VI in 1973. The Declaration states that the two Churches will strive to mutually endorse the baptismal sacrament of the other Church, in case a believer wishes to join the other Church.

Thirdly, during the same day and for the first time in Egypt an ecumenical prayer was held in the heart of the Boutrosia Church, which had been exposed to a terrorist attack few months prior to that day. Pope Tawadros had hosted for this prayer, his Holiness pope Francis and his Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, in addition to the heads of the Churches in Egypt: the Patriarch of the Catholic Copts, the Patriarch of Alexandria and the rest of Africa for the Greek Orthodox, the Patriarch of the Catholic Melkites for Antioch and the rest of the East, the Archbishop of the Episcopal Church in the Near East and the head of the Evangelical Church.

So much for the terms of the positive developments. As for the challenges, there are still discrepancies in relation to the understanding of some, as to the mutual endorsement of the sacrament of baptism. This issue requires some time and a lot of effort in order to reconcile the different views with regard to this point. But what keeps us optimistic is that many of the Coptic Church's bishops stress on the importance of NOT repeating the sacrament of baptism, at least for pastoral reasons, since the Church ministry is in need of such an agreement.