

## Egypt: A Call for Openness

A pastoral and political visit by Pope Francis to Egypt between the 28 and 29 April 2017.



Pope Francis' visit forms part of a five part sequence. It is first and foremost a **pastoral visit to Catholics** who form a very small minority within Egypt's Christian community. Let us remember that in addition to Coptic Catholics, Egypt has other communities of a more eastern origin including Armenian Catholics, Maronites, Greek-Catholics, Syrian-Catholics, Chaldeans as well as Latins. This extraordinary journey is part of a desire, repeated on numerous occasions, to lend very strong

**support to the Christian communities in the region.**

Secondly, it expresses a desire to **reconcile with the Coptic church, a reconciliation** culminating in the signing of a [declaration of intent](#) recognising a common baptism and a *sincere commitment by both parties not to repeat the sacrament of baptism*. However, this [declaration](#) chiefly affects the Coptic Orthodox Church since Catholics already recognise the Orthodox baptism.

On a political level, this visit has also enabled a meeting with **Président El-Sissi** so that previously established links can be consolidated.

Finally, it is a **rapprochement with Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayyeb, Grand Imam d'Al-Azhar.**

### Threats to Copts and Christians in the region

The Copts have been an intermittent *target* for Islamic groups since the time of Sadat. They have recently seen their situation deteriorate (attacks on Coptic churches in August 2013 by sympathisers of the deposed President Mohamed Morsi, the assassination of 20 Copts in Libya in February 2015 by *Islamic State (IS)*, *recent statements from the Egyptian arm of IS designating the Copts as favoured targets, several attacks on churches in Cairo, Alexandria and in the Nile Delta, assassinations of Copts in the coastal town of North Sinai El-Arish forcing Christian families to flee etc*).

### Christians are between a hammer and anvil

The overthrow of President Morsi, supported by the Coptic hierarchy reveals a question that arises for the whole region: the Christians of the Arab world find themselves between the hammer of the ruling power and the anvil of the opponents to this power (which often are jihadists). Opposition forces for their part do not hesitate to play on the question of religious minorities, in order to delegitimize the ruling powers and appear as protectors of minorities.

## **Discriminations**

These political and security tensions add to the institutional discrimination (construction of places of Christian worship, access to certain public offices) or other forms of discrimination (disparaging speeches and educational materials, violent and insulting acts against non-Muslims, frequent attacks on a confessional basis, access to employment issues, etc).

## **Citizenship**

The question which arises today in the Arab world in general is that of citizenship. Whilst their fellow Muslim *citizens* enjoy a far from ideal status, that of Christians in the Arab world is even worse.

The risk is that Christians, more than any others, flee the region. Hence the haemorrhaging of Christian communities, as has been the case in Syria and Iraq would be dramatic. The region is running the risk of becoming a totalitarian confessional monolith.

## **What solutions?**

Faced with these major challenges, what are the solutions available to Egypt, which is the main Christian centre in the region?

During his [speech at Al-Azhar University](#), the Pope insisted: “there will be no peace without an appropriate education of the younger generations. And there will be no appropriate education for young people today unless the education offered corresponds to the nature of man as an open and relational being. [...] Education offering respectful openness and sincere dialogue with others by recognising their fundamental rights and freedoms, especially religious freedom, [...]”

Al-Azhar has been criticised, particularly for certain half-hearted stances in respect of IS and because repeated appeals by President El-Sissi for a renewal of religious discourse have gone unanswered. The criticisms levelled at this one thousand-year old institution, from both the government and from the Egyptian media, have further increased following the two attacks on Palm Sunday. Al-Azhar has been accused of becoming “a breeding ground for terrorists”.

The Pope thus recalled the importance of education, an appropriate education so that relations of fraternity and peace can be established. He also addressed questions of respect for others, equality, citizenship, and of course renewal of religious dialogue through a revision of textbooks and through teaching. It is important to patiently undo the work undertaken by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood over nearly a century: to radicalise society through teaching.

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*Translated from the original text in French*