



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE FRANCIS
TO HIS HOLINESS TAWADROS II,
POPE OF ALEXANDRIA AND HEAD OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE HISTORIC MEETING OF THEIR PREDECESSORS,
POPE SAINT PAUL VI AND POPE SHENOUDA III**

Thursday, 11 May 2023

[[Multimedia](#)]

Your Holiness!

Dear brothers in Christ!

“This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it!”. It was with this Paschal acclamation, 50 years ago, that Pope Saint Paul VI welcomed your venerable predecessor, Pope Shenouda III, to Saint Peter’s Basilica. It is with the same acclamation that I welcome you today, beloved brother and dear friend Tawadros. I thank you from my heart for accepting my invitation to commemorate together the jubilee of this historic event in 1973, as well as the 10th anniversary of our first meeting in 2013.

In the ecumenical journey, it is important always to look ahead. Cultivating in the heart a healthy impatience and an ardent desire for unity, we must be, like the apostle Paul, “straining forward to what lies ahead” (cf. *Phil* 3:13), and continually asking ourselves, “Quanta est nobis via?” — How far do we still have to go? However, it is also necessary to *remember*, especially in times of discouragement, so as to rejoice in the path already travelled and to draw on the fervour of the pioneers who have gone before us. Looking ahead and remembering. Yet, it is undoubtedly all the more incumbent on us to *look up*, to thank the Lord for the steps we have taken and to beseech Him to give us the gift of the longed-for unity.

To thank and to supplicate. This is the purpose of our commemoration today. The meeting of our Predecessors, which took place in Rome from 9 to 13 May 1973, marked a historic milestone in relations between the See of Saint Peter and the See of Saint Mark. It was the first meeting between a Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and a Bishop of Rome. It also marked the end of a theological dispute dating back to the Council of Chalcedon, thanks to the signing on 10 May 1973 of a memorable [joint Christological Declaration](#), which later served as inspiration for similar agreements with the other Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The meeting led to the creation of the joint international Commission between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, which in 1979 adopted the pioneering Principles to Guide the Search for Unity between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, signed by Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Shenouda III, which stated in prophetic words that “the unity we envisage in no way means absorption of one by the other or domination by one over the other. It is at the service of each to help each live better the proper gifts it has received from God’s Spirit”.

This joint Commission then opened the way to the birth of a fruitful theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the entire family of Eastern Orthodox Churches, which held its first meeting in 2004 in Cairo, hosted by His Holiness Shenouda. I thank the Coptic Orthodox Church for its commitment to this theological dialogue. I am also grateful to His Holiness for the fraternal attention he continues to pay to the Coptic Catholic Church, proximity that found praiseworthy expression in the creation of the National Council of Christian Churches in Egypt.

As can be seen, the meeting of our distinguished Predecessors has never ceased to bear fruit in the journey of our Churches towards full communion. It is also in remembrance of the 1973 meeting that Your Holiness came to me for the first time on 10 May 2013, a few months after your enthronement and a few weeks after the beginning of my Pontificate. On that occasion, you proposed to celebrate every 10 May as the “Day of friendship between Copts and Catholics”, which since then is punctually celebrated by our Churches.

When speaking of friendship, I am reminded of the famous eighth-century Coptic icon depicting the Lord resting his hand on the shoulder of his friend, the holy monk Mena of Egypt. This icon is sometimes called the “icon of friendship” because the Lord seems to want to accompany his friend and walk with him. Similarly, the bonds of friendship between our Churches are rooted in the friendship of Jesus Christ Himself with all His disciples whom He calls “friends” (cf. *Jn* 15:15), and whom He accompanies on their journey, as He did with the pilgrims of Emmaus.

In this journey of friendship we are also accompanied by the martyrs, who testify that “greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn* 15:13). I have no words to express my gratitude for the precious gift of a relic of the Coptic martyrs killed in Libya on 15 February 2015. These martyrs were baptized not only in water and the Spirit, but also in blood, with a blood that is a seed of unity for all followers of Christ. I am pleased to announce today that,

with Your Holiness' consent, these 21 martyrs will be included in the Roman Martyrology as a sign of the spiritual communion uniting our two Churches.

May the prayers of the Coptic martyrs, united with those of the Theotokos, continue to make our Churches grow in friendship, until the blessed day when we will be able to celebrate together at the same altar and commune with the same Body and Blood of the Saviour, "that the world may believe" (*Jn 17:21*)!

Thank you.

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