

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE  
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE  
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

# BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 230511a

Thursday 11.05.2023

## Private meeting of Pope Francis with 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

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, Pope Francis received in audience His Holiness Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the historic meeting of their predecessors, Pope Saint Paul VI and Pope Shenouda III (1973-2023). After the private meeting and the presentation of the delegations, before the exchange of gifts, both delivered an address. At the end, the Holy Father and the Patriarch Tawadros proceeded to the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel for a moment of joint prayer.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the meeting:

### Address of the Holy Father

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, fifty 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 tenth 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, 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 an 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 St. John Paul II and Pope Shenouda III, which stated in prophetic words that “the unity we envision does not mean the absorption of one by the other or the domination of one over the other. It is at the service of each one to help him or her better live out the specific gifts he or she has received from the Spirit of God”.

This joint Commission then opened the way to the birth of a fruitful 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 “no one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s 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 twenty-one 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.

---