



7th Week of Easter 21 May 2023 – Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“If any one of you should suffer for being a Christian.... he should thank God that he has been called one”.

This last week we have witnessed a wonderful event take place in Rome: Pope Francis welcomed the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II to address the Wednesday audience in St Peter’s Square as a sign of friendship between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. *“I stand here, in the place where Paul and Peter the Apostles preached, and I am delighted to meet you in this wonderful square”* said the Coptic Patriarch, who recalled his first visit to Rome in 2013, as well as Francis’ *“precious visit”* to Egypt in 2017. The meeting between Pope Francis and the Patriarch on 10 May marked the 50th Anniversary of the first meeting between a Coptic Patriarch and the Pope: this was in 1973 and it was between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Shenouda III, the first between a bishop of Rome and a Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In memory of that event Tawadros went to visit Francis 10 years ago on the occasion of his election as Patriarch and Francis as Pope. On 10 May 1973 a memorable declaration had been signed putting an end to the controversy surrounding the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which had led to a rupture between Rome and many Eastern Churches. The declaration affirmed that the faithful share the same faith in Christ, true God and true men.

When the Patriarch visited the Pope on 10 May 2013 he proposed to celebrate every 10 May as a *“Day of Coptic-Catholic Friendship”*. Every year since *“we call each other on the phone, send greetings and remain good brothers”* said the Pope. The next day Thursday 11 May the Pope and the Patriarch met again for personal conversation. This led to a further development: the recognition of the 21 Libyan Martyrs (of whom 20 were Copts) killed by Daech (ISIS) in Libya on February 15, 2015. The 21 Martyrs will be inscribed in the Roman Martyrology *“as a sign of the spiritual communion that unites our two Churches”* said the Pope. The Patriarch presented the Pope with a relic of the Coptic Martyrs.

The Coptic and Catholic Churches have saints in common from the first 5 centuries: Egypt was evangelised by St Mark from which *“Christian monasticism spread and established itself with its Saints, Anthony, Macarius, Pachomius, inspiring the School of Alexandria, a beacon of theology in history”* said the Patriarch. This is an historic event: it is the first time since the 5th century that Catholic and Orthodox Churches will share Saints.

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



I have been thinking of Father Solomon Tesfamichael, our Eritrean Chaplain who celebrates Mass in the Alexandrian Rite at St Vincent's, Ashted and Vauxhall, and the new Coptic Cathedral nearby in Solihull, where I live. The two Church leaders went to pray in the Vatican's Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer) Chapel. It seems to me to be a moment when we can celebrate in prayer at local level the unity that is being celebrated in Rome.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles for the 7th Sunday of Easter points to the Apostles returning to the upper room where they were staying and joining in prayer *"with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers"*. Next Sunday is Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on this gathering and the beginning of the mission of the Church sent by Christ to continue His proclamation of the good news of salvation. We are celebrating Mary's continuous presence with us in this month of May, not least with Pilgrimage to Walsingham and Lourdes, and our emphasis on praying the Rosary which Pope Francis spoke of this week as *"the compendium of the entire history of salvation"*.

The proclamation of the good news comes at a cost: we are so aware of this continuing in these days in different parts of the world. Peter says in his first letter in the reading *"If anyone of you should suffer for being a Christian.... he should thank God that he was called one"*. It is through the Cross that Jesus entered into glory. We dare to believe we will live by the same Spirit that Jesus Christ lives by. Holy Martyrs of Libya pray for us on Pentecost Sunday.

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Ethnic Chaplaincies

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese

5 Maplebeck Court, Lode Lane, Solihull, B91 2UB. E: co-ordinator.ethnic.chaplaincy@rcaob.org.uk T: 07551 277616