

The Egyptian Church is Called to a Renaissance

F. Rafiq Greiche, *Oasis*, 31/05/2011(<http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/node/6975>)

Following the celebrations for the peaceful expulsion of a dictator who for thirty years had been oppressing his people whilst allowing his family and entourage to sack the Country's wealth, religious clashes have re-emerged in Egypt, this time more violently than in the past.

Less than two months after the outburst of the revolution, in the village of Atfih (40 km from Cairo), on 3 March 2011 the rumour had spread of a relationship between a Muslim woman and a Christian man. Some Islamist fanatics used this as a pretext to set fire to the church of that poor village. These extremists belong to the Salafist current, come out into the open after the revolution of January 25th. Inspired by the Saudi Wahabite movement, the Salafists reject Egyptian Sunnite Islamism, considered impious as too close to the Shi'ite doctrine. The term *salafiyya* suggests the promotion and application of shari'ah in the form used by the earliest generations of Muslims (*salaf*).

The Egyptian government and the military junta have staged an impromptu management of this crisis, without even trying those responsible for the crimes taking place in the village: the church fire, the murder of 11 people and the wounding of 150 more. The military junta had the church repaired, to make it accessible on Easter Day. From that moment on, however, Islamic-Christian relationships started to stiffen, especially when some days later, on 19 March 2011, a referendum on constitutional reform took place, on which occasion Muslim Brothers, Salafists and jihad organizations put down their collective foot and turned the referendum into a one on religion.

The Egyptians had in fact been called to decide on quite different matters, such as the length of the presidential term and the choice of the elections calendar. But the Islamic organizations exploited the people's poverty and ignorance by stating in the mosques that a "no" would be followed by Egypt's conversion to Christianity, whilst by voting "yes" Egypt would remain Muslim. According to some rumours, after the referendum the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists asked for the return of Camelia, the protagonist of a story started two years ago, whereby the Coptic Orthodox Church allegedly had kidnapped her following her conversion to Islam, despite the fact that Al-Azhar authorities had already denied this conversion. The Salafists made a noisy demonstration by occupying one of Cairo's main mosques, situated by the Cathedral and the papal residence of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III. Every Friday they surrounded the cathedral and the residence for hours until the army intervened. Camelia then broke the silence by declaring on *Al-hayât* television channel that she was a Christian and wanted to die a Christian, that she had not changed religion, that she had not been kidnapped, and that she was living in Cairo with her husband, a Coptic priest, and their son. The following day, according to other rumours, a married Christian woman and mistress of a Muslim man was kidnapped and taken to a church in Cairo's Embaba quarter. The Salafists then asked for her return by protesting outside the church and ending up by shooting and throwing Molotov

cocktails everywhere. So a church took fire, another one in the same part of the city was destroyed, and some Christian homes were burnt.

This working-class area, inhabited by masses of Muslims and Christians, had thus turned into a battlefield causing 15 dead, 210 injured and over 400 people arrested by the military authorities and the police. Egypt had experienced a night of blood. On the next day 200.000 Christians gathered in Tahrir Square, before the Egyptian television building, in the quarter of Masbiru, become notorious after a stone throwing that destroyed several cars. Until today, Christians continue to gather there. The Prime Minister visited the Christians and promised them an inquiry on the events at Embaba, as well as the reopening of the churches that had been denied authorization by the previous regime, and the promulgation on one law for the places of worship in the following thirty days.

The religious clashes have become too numerous in too little time, and the government and the military junta have not yet taken up a clear position, possibly to avoid supporting one side to the detriment of the other. There are certainly agitators like the Salafists and certain Muslim Brothers leaders whose slogan is "Islam is the solution". Some of them have declared that, should they come to power, they would introduce the khalifate and, given the scope, apply hadd penalties [namely, penalties directly disciplined by the Koran, editor's note].

The inquiries have proved that behind the religious incidents there are the remnants of the ex-President's National Party, intending to create confusion in the society. The Catholic Church is also a victim, as it is engaged within the same context. The Patriarch and Catholic Bishops' Commission have gathered to discuss the situation and understand how to educate the Catholic people to an active participation in the next elections, in order to elect open-minded candidates who believe in the freedom of the neighbour. But it must be said that the sheikh of Al-Azhar, imam Al-Tayyib, apart from his personal opinions and probably under pressure from the most radical elements, does not miss any opportunity to stress the freezing of the dialogue with the Vatican and invite Benedict XVI not to interfere any longer in Egyptian affairs by requesting European Countries to protect Christians in the Middle East.

As early as in 2008 and 2009 the imam had held a series of lectures on Egyptian television about the falsification of the Gospel by Christians, accused to have eliminated the parts of Scripture in which the mission of Mohammed is announced. In 2006 he also had attacked the Pope during a meeting with the Catholic Church, following Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture. Finally, he has recently recruited into Al-Azhar sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, known for his intolerance and for being a leader followed by the Salafists, the Muslim Brothers and other groups -- which raises a number of questions about his conduct.

Despite these difficulties, there are some positive elements. Moderate Muslims fear the coming onto power of the Salafists and the Muslim Brothers: they are worried about the latter's escalation and keen to discover their real intentions. Thanks to its geographic position, Egypt is a waypoint for many religions and cultures: this is an idea rooted in all Egyptians. There are some who declare that Muslims and Christians are one, and want harmony and respect for the

other. In the words of one of the Muslim Brothers: «I came into Tahrir Square as a "Brother" and came out of it as an "Egyptian"».

The Church, particularly the Orthodox Church, must, however, discover its own essence and reserve a more active role for the laity, allowing them more freedom to express themselves and their will, and to play, as everyone else, a social and political role in society, and not just inside church walls. After having lived marginally or, to be more precise, after having marginalized themselves, Christians must adhere to parties (particularly to the liberal ones), and take on the place that belongs to them in the Country, by participating in the next elections and forming an opinion on the current situation in Egypt.

Maybe the current events are to a good purpose and, as Jesus says, «Do not fear, little flock». I trust in the fact that these events represent a transition towards a new life and a new Egypt, able to renew itself together with its citizens in the sign of freedom, dignity and human solidarity.