

The Egyptian family house: Muslims and Christians, holding hands

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Photo Credit: Diocese of Egypt

Of all the slogans of the Egyptian revolution, ‘One Hand’ was among the most popular. At various times it was shouted by the thousands to indicate the unity of Muslims and Christians, or the unity of the people and the army, or more recently in the fight against terrorism.

But along this progression the utopian unity of Tahrir Square has faded. It has been challenged by political struggles and sectarian rhetoric, which have at times intermixed.

Perhaps, then, in recognition of the dual truths of religious unity and diversity, Bishop Mouneer Hanna of the Anglican diocese of Egypt opened the final session of the 2014 Imam-Priest Exchange with a different hand analogy.

‘Let us hold hands together,’ he said, ‘for the sake of Egypt.’



The Imam-Priest Exchange is one of the most dynamic projects of the Egyptian Family House, an entity created in 2011 by the Azhar and Coptic Orthodox Church. The Protestant

and Catholic denominations are also vital participants, and the Anglican Church has taken the lead in training religious leaders in dialogue and practical partnership.

The Family House has a mandate to interact with government ministers through its committee work in education, media, youth, and religious discourse. But it is this latter committee which is actively preparing its second mandate: Taking the message of national unity to the grassroots.

For it is here that the real challenge of terrorism and sectarianism must be fought. No matter the international scope of these issues gripping the region, too many Egyptians are drafted into extremism.

‘This session coincides with a bloody period that Egypt is going through, killing Muslims and Christians together,’ said Sheikh Muhi al-Din Afifi, head of the Azhar’s Islamic Research Center. ‘We must spread a culture of citizenship, love, peace, and coexistence.’

The military aspect of this challenge is important, Bishop Mouneer emphasized. ‘But ideology is more important and this is why we are here today,’ he said.

‘I hope and trust this will not be our last meeting, but the beginning of our mutual work.’

November 3-5 witnessed the final of four sessions during which 35 imams and 35 priests from throughout the country lived together, attended training seminars, and visited local historical and religious sites. Their dialogue, so to speak, was not the formal discussion of religious doctrines, but rather the exchange of life, rubbing shoulders over meals and jokes.



They repeated the program experienced a year earlier by seventy others, to be repeated again in 2015 with seventy more.

The first session concerned how to get to know each other, followed in the second by how to live together. But as participants grew more comfortable the purposes grew more demanding. Session three was on how to cooperate, and session four on how to work together.

‘I beseech you to have joint work together throughout Egypt,’ said Afifi, ‘not just religious but also medical and developmental.’

It was not easy in the beginning. During the first session the 2013 graduates were brought back to testify of their experiences. Imams and priests demonstrated their newfound friendships, as just a year previously they had not known each other.

However, there remains challenges in these relationships. Some spoke that a priest would never be welcome in a mosque, nor an imam in a church. Some emphasized the glories of their own religion, and some described others as not really wanting to be there in the first place.

‘It is very hard work,’ said Saleem Wassef, the project director and a lay minister in the Anglican Church. ‘But I stress to them we are here to emphasize a culture of “me and you together,” rather than simply “me or you.”’

These grumblings, however, were outnumbered by testimonies of interaction. Fr. Mityas of Fayoum visited Sheikh Ali when his wife fell ill. Fr. Suriyal of Ismailia visited schools and hospitals with Sheikh Abdel Rahman. Fr. Kyrillos of Port Said solved sectarian problems with Sheikh Hassan. And Sheikh Hisham of Mallawi visits coffee shops with various priests of his city, asking people their impressions about men of religion.

These social appearances are to Bishop Mouneer one of the most important outcomes of the meetings.

‘We are not here to listen to lectures and visit locations,’ he told participants, ‘but each one after leaving here must look for the closest imam or priest near to him and make relationships, hold seminars, and walk in the street together.’



Indeed, as imams and priests left their hotel in Dokki they needed to go about four blocks to a main road where the bus could take them to their next location. Onlookers stopped conversations and turned to watch the unusual spectacle.

Some priests confessed they had all but stopped walking alone in the streets of their cities, being subject to insults and even spitting. But walking together makes a great difference.

‘Egyptians love men of religion,’ said Fr. Arsanious of BeniSuef, ‘and if they see a priest and an imam together it influences them to work together and overcome fanaticism.’

‘These displays of love are like the leaven that spreads through the whole community.’

Fr. Arsanious wants to help open a regional branch of the Family House in his area. Fr. Mikhail and Sheikh Emad hope to begin work in the Cairo slum of Kilo Arbawa Nus.

If successful, they will follow in the footsteps of the previous class which opened branches in Alexandria, Luxor, Port Said, Ismailia, and Giza. This is where the real work takes place, outside the conferences, which will prove their lasting value. Will the friendships forged between imams and priests over the course of a year carry over into continued cooperation?



In expectant hope, Wassef trained them how to measure the fruit of their friendship. Are they working together as a team? Have they touched all classes of their local area? Have they incorporated others already at work in civil society? And have they written out a plan to accomplish the above, with deadlines?

‘We are working hard to exchange a culture of hatred with a culture of love,’ said Wassef. ‘This is for the welfare of our country, to change the minds of Muslims and Christians toward one another.’

‘The project helps reach unreached places.’

Thanks to journalist Jayson Casper for this article on the Imam-Priest Exchange. He writes for Arab West Report, Christianity Today, Lapido Media, and other publications, and blogs at asenseofbelonging.org.