



## Egypt: A History of Religious Cooperation

Over thousands of years, Egypt has been home to adherents of many religions, allowing religious communities to grow and thrive alongside one another. As testament to Egypt's pluralistic society, Pope Francis will travel to Egypt on 28 April for a historic trip that will include a visit to Al Azhar, the most prestigious institution for Islamic learning in the Muslim world.

During the trip, the first papal visit to Egypt since Pope John Paul II in 2000, Pope Francis will meet with President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, Coptic Pope Tawadros II, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar and other Coptic and Islamic leaders. The visit builds upon growing engagement between Egypt and the Vatican, including Al Azhar Grand Imam Dr. Ahmed El Tayyeb's Vatican meeting with Pope Francis in May 2016 and the February 2017 resumption of interfaith dialogue sessions between Al Azhar and the Vatican focused on combating religious extremism and terrorism.

Pope Francis' visit is an opportunity to once again highlight Egypt's tradition as a nation that has fostered the peaceful coexistence of multiple faiths for millennia.



**بابا السلام في مصر السلام**  
**POPE OF PEACE IN EGYPT OF PEACE**

*The official logo and motto of Pope Francis' visit to Egypt*

### CHRISTIANITY IN EGYPT

- According to tradition, Christianity entered Egypt with St. Mark the Evangelist in the years after Christ's crucifixion. Today he is recognized as the founder of the Coptic Church. The word "Copt" comes from the Arabic word "qubt," which in turn derived from the Coptic "kubti," meaning "Egyptian."
- Christianity was practiced widely in Egypt during its early years; Coptic fragments of the Gospel of John dating to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century have been found in Upper Egypt.
- Alexandria was one of early Christianity's oldest centers. Alexandria's early Christian community was home to leading church fathers such as Clement, Origen, Didymus and others, and gave birth to Christianity's monastic movement.
- Both the Koran and the hadith teach Muslims to respect adherents of other religions, and in particular the inhabitants of Egypt, who at the time of the Prophet were mainly Copts. Islam respects free choice of religion, part of the basis of centuries of harmonious coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Egypt.



**To symbolize interfaith collaboration in the movement for independence,** Egyptians, both Muslim and Coptic, raised this flag during the Revolution of 1919 to symbolize national unity, featuring a Muslim crescent and a Christian cross at its center.

### POLITICAL INCLUSION AND EGYPTIAN INDEPENDENCE

- Copts have played an important role in modern Egyptian society. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Copts were appointed to all offices, including as judges to Egyptian courts and as heads of local governorates, and were allowed to serve as government employees.
- Muslims and Coptic Christians were close partners in the struggle against British colonial rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Churches and mosques were both important organizing centers for the 1919 revolution against British rule.
- Early nationalist movements had many Coptic and Muslim leaders who collaborated in strikes, demonstrations, communications and policy-making.



## COPTIC CHRISTIANS TODAY

- Coptic Christians today form the largest Christian community in the Middle East.
- All Egyptians share a strong sense of national unity. In the words of the late Coptic Pope Shenouda III, Egyptians are 'sons of a single homeland.'
- This national unity was clearly on display during both the 2011 and 2013 revolutions, when there were widespread media reports of Christians and Muslims collaborating to protect one another. Christians protected and guarded Muslims during their daily prayers, while Muslims helped protect Christian churches throughout the unrest.
- In 2014, Egyptians ratified a new constitution that guarantees Christians the right to exercise their faith freely. As a result, Parliament debated and passed historic legislation to "regulate constructing and renovating churches, in a manner that guarantees the freedom to practice religious rituals for Christians."
- President El Sisi is working with Al Azhar and other leaders to reform the religious discourse in Egypt, placing greater emphasis on tolerance, respect and interfaith dialogue.
- In 2015, President El Sisi became the first Egyptian head of state to attend Christmas mass at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. Since then, it has become a tradition for the President to participate in Christmas mass each year.
- At Christmas mass in 2017, President El Sisi announced plans to complete the renovation and restoration of 56 Christian churches damaged or destroyed by acts of terrorism in the summer of 2013.
- Today, as political and social conditions in the Middle East are shifting, strong cooperation and collaboration between Muslims and Coptic Christians create a cohesive national fabric that helps to ensure continued stability and strength in Egypt.
- Today there are 36 Coptic Christian members of Egypt's Parliament, the largest number to serve since the establishment of Parliament in 1866.

## THE VATICAN AND AL AZHAR

- In May 2016, Al Azhar Grand Imam Dr. Ahmed El Tayyeb met with Pope Francis at the Vatican, the first such meeting since the Grand Imam's 2011 meeting with Pope Benedict XVI.
- In February 2017, Al Azhar and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue hosted a symposium on countering extremism and religious violence in Cairo. At the symposium, Al Azhar and Vatican representatives called for eliminating the "spirit of hatred and animosity for religions and defaming religious symbols"; cutting off resources, including money and weapons, to terrorist organizations; and addressing the "causes of the phenomena of extremism, violence, poverty, ignorance and the political abuse of religion and incorrect understanding of religious texts." Taking into consideration the widespread influence of these two institutions, this cooperation will have a global impact countering the destructive narrative of intolerance and extremism.

