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Pope Francis and Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, Egypt, lead prayers in the R

Pope Francis and Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, Egypt, lead prayers in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 11, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The Vatican is formally recognizing 21 Coptic Orthodox workers who were beheaded by Islamic militants in Libya as martyrs with their own feast day, in a significant new ecumenical gesture aimed at forging unity between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Pope Francis announced the inscription of the 21 workers, most of them Egyptians, in the Roman Martyrology, the compendium of saints celebrated liturgically in the Catholic Church, during an audience May 11 with the Coptic Orthodox pope.

During the audience, Francis kissed relics of the 21 young men that Tawadros II offered him as a gift.

Islamic State militants beheaded the workers on a beach in Sirte, Libya in February 2015. A grisly video of the executions was posted online, shocking Egyptians and prompting the Cairo government to stage punitive strikes against militant targets in Libya.

The men's bodies were recovered in 2017 and returned to Egypt, where a church was built in their hometown to honor them.

"These martyrs were baptized not only in the water and Spirit, but also in blood, a blood that is the seed of unity for all of Christ’s followers," Francis told Tawadros during the audience in the Apostolic Palace.

The inscription of the Coptic Orthodox martyrs in the Catholic liturgical calendar, Francis said, "is a sign of the spiritual communion that unites our two churches."

The Coptic Orthodox Church is the largest Christian denomination in majority Muslim Egypt and was founded by the apostle, St. Mark, in Alexandria in the 1st century.

It is one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches with which the Vatican has relations and a process of dialogue that began 50 years ago this week with the historic encounter at the Vatican between St. Paul VI and Tawadros’ predecessor, Shenouda III.

Francis has frequently referred to the "ecumenism of blood" that unites all Christians in honoring martyrs of the faith. But the inscription of modern-day martyrs of another church in the Catholic liturgical calendar is a significant first, according to Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Vatican office responsible for relations with other Christian churches.

"This is the beginning of a new era of relations," Farrell said.

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The Vatican will likely designate Feb. 15 as their feast day, the same day the Coptic Orthodox Church honors them, officials said.

Tawadros was at the Vatican to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the meeting between the two previous popes and joined Francis on stage during the Catholic pontiff's weekly general audience on Wednesday.

Tawadros is scheduled to celebrate a liturgy for the Coptic Orthodox faithful on Sunday at Francis' cathedral, St. John Lateran.

During a meeting with reporters, Tawadros said Francis seemed genuinely pleased to receive the relics of the 21 martyrs and promised to build a special altar for them.

"This is something that helps promote greater unity between the two churches," he said.