

Coptic pope dies; reigned since 1971

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 27, 2012



Pope Shenouda III leads an Orthodox Christmas Mass at the Coptic cathedral in Cairo, Egypt, Jan. 6, 2010. (CNS/Reuters/Asmaa Waguih)

Egypt's Coptic minority, the largest and most influential Christian community in the Middle East, already faced deep uncertainty about its future in the wake of the Arab Spring. Many Copts feel suspended between the promise of equality in a democratic state, after centuries of second-class citizenship, and the peril of an Islamic theocracy.

Now they also face a vacuum in leadership with the March 17 death of Pope Shenouda III, who for more than 40 years was the face and voice of Egypt's 10 million Coptic Christians, representing 10 percent of the national population.

Given its size and institutional footprint, Egypt's Coptic Orthodox church is seen as a bellwether for Christianity in the Middle East -- and if it implodes, many analysts fear a ripple effect across the entire region.

Some Copts fear Shenouda's death may leave their church at greater risk, while others argue that it could liberate a younger generation of Christian activists to campaign directly for human rights and religious freedom, rather than taking their cues from the church's more conservative and cautious clerical leadership.

A fierce Egyptian patriot and a figure committed to ecumenism, or the quest for Christian unity, Nazeer Gayed Roufail, better known by his religious name of "Shenouda," ruled over the Coptic Orthodox church since November 1971.

Early in his tenure, Shenouda clashed with Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, insisting that he do more to combat the rise of Islamic radicalism, and was sent into exile for three years until Sadat's assassination in 1981. Under President Hosni Mubarak, Shenouda steered a more cautious course, occasionally protesting explicit attacks on Christians, such as a January 2000 assault by Salafists in Upper Egypt that left 21 Copts dead, but avoiding any commentary that could be seen as questioning the legitimacy of the regime.

Shenouda never took a position on the Tahrir Square uprisings, which led some observers to see him as quietly supporting the status quo under Mubarak.

Politics aside, Shenouda enjoyed wide esteem as a spiritual and national figure.

His death at age 88 was given extensive coverage on Egypt's state-controlled television, and the army loaned a helicopter to the Coptic church to transfer Shenouda's body to the monastery where he will be buried. Both General Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the de facto ruler of Egypt, and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb of Al-Azhar, the enormous university and mosque complex often described as the "Vatican of the Islamic world," expressed condolences.

El-Tayeb also attended Shenouda's March 20 funeral, along with some 2,000 representatives of Egypt's religious, civil and military establishment.

Within the Coptic church, Shenouda took a special interest in education for the young, instituting courses of catechesis and faith formation even in the smallest and most remote settings. He also guided the development of the Coptic diaspora, appointing bishops and creating dioceses around the world. During his tenure, the number of Coptic dioceses in North America grew from just four to more than 200.

In the ecumenical field, Shenouda signed a joint declaration of faith on the Incarnation with Pope Paul VI in 1973, and also met Pope John Paul II in 2000 during John Paul's visit to Egypt. Pope Benedict XVI said on March 18 that "the Catholic church as a whole shares the grief that afflicts the Orthodox Copts" after Shenouda's death.

Given the loss of such a towering figure, some observers worry that the Coptic minority will be even more exposed to radical currents, especially if representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied forces win a decisive victory in national elections set for May.

Others, however, contend that the transition may free up lay Coptic activists to play a more direct role in national affairs, rather than following the lead of the figure on top.

"There are serious questions as to how Copts will play their role in a country undergoing transition, because during his years Pope Shenouda decided and the congregation of Copts followed," said Soliman Shafiq, a commentator on Coptic affairs.

After the Jan. 25 revolution, Shafiq argued, "it can no longer be acceptable that the church is the single body that speaks for the rights of Copts, simply because this runs counter to the adequate exercise of citizenship."

That's a view echoed by Jesuit Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian-born theologian and expert on Islam based in Lebanon.

"Within the Coptic church more freedom should be given to the bishop, priests, laity," Samir wrote recently. "They need a united but not dictatorial voice. They also need to engage more in society, for the common good, politics, human rights."

In terms of the succession, the bishops of the Coptic Orthodox church, gathered in a "synod," will shortly convene a meeting with lay leaders of the Coptic community to identify candidates. The bishops will then vote, producing a list of three possible successors.

Those three candidates will celebrate a common Mass, during which their names will be written on pieces of paper and placed in a container. A child will be asked to pick one slip of paper at random, and the name chosen will become the next Coptic pope.

Because Egyptian law requires the new head of the Coptic church to be certified by the state, many Copts hope

to have the process completed before May, ahead of the looming elections.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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