

In Egypt, Coptic Christians help Muslims celebrate Feast of Sacrifice

They financially aid poor Muslims to buy the ritual animal to take part in the Eid al-Adha sacrifice July 21



A Coptic priest distributes holy communion at the Historical Church of Blessed Virgin Mary in Mostorod district in Cairo, Egypt, 3 August 2020. (Photo by EPA/KHALED ELFIQI/MaxPPP)

La Croix International staff, Egypt, 23 June 2021

Coptic Christians in Egypt are reaching out to help Muslims by purchasing bonds issued by the ministry of religious affairs for the occasion of the "Feast of Sacrifice".

Egyptian media outlets reported that in the province of Minya, 245 km south of the capital Cairo, four parishes purchased "sacrificial bonds" from the local unit of the ministry of religious affairs, costing 26,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$1,659).

The Coptic Orthodox parish of the Virgin Mary opted for bond subscriptions in Abu Kabir, in the Governorate of Sharkia, the third most populous place in the country, as did also a Coptic Catholic parish on the Red Sea.

The ministry gives financial aid to allow Muslim families who cannot afford to buy the ritual animal (usually a bovine, a sheep or a goat) to take part in the Eid al-Adha sacrifice.

Muslims on July 21 will celebrate Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice. The festival commemorates the story of Prophet Abraham, revered also by Christians and Jews, who was willing to sacrifice his only son at God's command. Scripture says that God did so to test Abraham. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, he was stopped by an angel. Then he saw in a thicket a ram caught by its horns and sacrificed it instead of his son.

For Muslims, this is one of two major festivals and times when they will reflect on the meaning of sacrifice and devotion, pray and together with family and friends thank God for blessings received.

Though the official rhetoric toward Christians in Egypt has changed under current ruler Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, they still endure discrimination, sectarian violence, and terrorist attacks.

The government has lifted curbs regarding building new churches, which Christians have been awaiting for a long time. It has initiated a "Egyptian Family Home" initiative — a cultural communications campaign to foster religious tolerance — as a national project to "defuse community tensions following sectarian violence." The government has also started the "Customary Councils" to settle disputes between individuals in rural areas.

Egypt now supports a national project that promotes the journey of the Holy Family from historical Palestine throughout Egypt. In 2017, Pope Francis declared the journey as an official Christian pilgrimage.

No official discrimination but prejudices remain

There are many instances of discrimination, communal violence and hate crimes against the largest Christian community in the Arab world who make up 10 percent of the mostly Muslim 82 million population in Egypt.

Christian women have particularly faced hate crimes on many occasions.

On April 3, a Coptic Christian woman and her 6-year-old son were murdered by a Muslim cab driver. A heartbreaking video of her 4-year-old daughter, who witnessed the gruesome incident, went viral on social media.

In January 2020, Catherine Ramzi, a Coptic Christian mother of four daughters, had a narrow escape when a Muslim man tried to kill her for not wearing a veil.

Last December, the court set free the assailants who attacked, and dragged naked, a 74-year-old Coptic Christian woman.

The acquittal of three defendants, including a father and his two sons by the Minya Governorate criminal court was criticized by Christians and rights groups.

On December 10, in the al-Wardian district of Alexandria, three brothers from a Muslim family attacked Coptic shops near St. Damiana Church, killing 47-year-old Christian, and injuring two others seriously.

The remnants of the erstwhile Islamic State are also active in the country's remote areas.

In April they recently released a video of the execution of Nabil Habashy Salama, a 62-year-old Christian man in Bir Al Abd, a city in North Sinai.

Habashy was abducted in November 2020. A businessman, Habashy was active in the Christian community and helped build the city's church, St. Mary.

In a statement, the Coptic Orthodox Church called Habashy "a faithful son and servant" who "adhered to his religion until death."

Pope Francis, who visited Egypt in April 2017, released a video in February, praying for 21 Coptic Christians beheaded by the ISIS fundamentalists in Libya in 2015. "They are our saints, saints of all Christians, saints of all Christian denominations and traditions," the pope said.

On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis signed the human fraternity document with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque and University. The pact celebrates "the spirit of human fraternity and respect for diversity among all people across the globe."

According to tradition, there have been Christians in Egypt as early as 42 AD, before St Peter and St Paul were martyred in Rome (c. 64-67 AD). Both the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria led Pope Tawadros II, and the Coptic Catholic Church, headed by Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria, Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak, trace their origins to Saint Mark the evangelist.