The Pope in Egypt

The visit of Pope Francis to Egypt on April 28-29, 2017 (previously, the Pope visited the Middle East three years ago – Jordan, Palestine, and Israel in 2014) could have become historical had it not been for the conflict surrounding the DPRK, primarily provoked by the US Administration, which has taken up all the attention of the international community, alongside the Presidential elections in France. When Francis was leaving the ancient Egyptian land, he was asked questions on these topics. He responded reluctantly, preferring being questioned about his first visit to Egypt in 44 years, except for the “pilgrimage”, and in fact, the passing visit of Pope John Paul II in 2000. It was then, in 1973, that Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Shenouda III laid the foundations for the relationship between the Coptic and Catholic churches, the development of which was one of the main objectives of this visit. The declaration adopted in that far year recorded the creation of a commission for a theological dialogue between the two churches, which opened the way for a wider communication between the Catholic Church and the entire family of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

In the landmark document, as emphasized in the new declaration of the Pope of Rome Francis and the Patriarch of Coptic Theodoros (Theodore) the Second, both churches recognized that, in accordance with the apostolic tradition, they profess “one faith in one Triune God” and “in the divinity of the Only Begotten Son of God … a perfect God with respect to His divinity, a perfect man with respect to his humanity.” It was also recognized that “Divine life is given to us and nourishes us through the seven Sacraments” and that “we honour the Virgin Mary, the Mother of True Light,” the “Mother of God.” At that time, it was a breakthrough talking point in the inter-Christian dialogue, especially given the fact that the Coptic Church is Miaphysite (pre-Chalcedonian), which is interpreted (unjustly) by many people as its monophysitism.

In the new declaration, the parties have taken the next steps towards each other in order to demonstrate their readiness to deepen the interaction of the two branches of Christianity. As the spiritual basis for this interaction, it was stated: “Together, we can bear witness to such fundamental values as the sanctity and dignity of the human life, the sanctity of marriage and family, and the respect for all the creatures that God entrusted to us. In the face of many modern problems such as secularization and the globalization of indifference (an interesting new term Author’s note), we are called upon to offer you a common answer based on the values of the Gospels and the treasures of our traditions. In this regard, we are pleased to begin a deeper study of the Eastern and Latin fathers, and we will promote fruitful exchanges in pastoral life, especially with regard to catechesis and the mutual spiritual enrichment of monastic and religious communities.”

Although Francis’ long-awaited April visit to Egypt was intended primarily to give impetus to the theological rapprochement of the two churches, the movement towards eucharistic communication, which was confirmed by the contents of the Joint Declaration, took place when the Copts faced one of the most brutal attacks in their history, and their churches were desecrated on April 9-10 by two terrorist attacks organized by Isis, which claimed almost 50 lives. This tragic coincidence gave a special colour to the visit of the Pope, which the Copts perceived as an act of spiritual support to their coreligionists, which was also reflected in the Joint Declaration, which stressed the desire to ensure the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims in one land. In fact, the apostolic fathers had to resort to the secular liberal rhetoric. To defend the Copts rights, the Declaration includes a note that “all the members of
society have the right and duty to participate fully in the life of the country, enjoying full and equal citizenship and cooperating in the building of their country. Religious freedom, including the freedom of conscience, is rooted in human dignity, and is the cornerstone of all other freedoms. This is a sacred and inalienable right.”

It should be recognized that it was precisely this effect (the positioning of the Pope as defender of all Christians, who does not deny liberal values at the same time), which the Vatican counted on. This effect was enhanced by the content of Francis’ meeting with the Imam of the largest Islamic university Al-Azhar University, Ahmed al-Teyib, dedicated to the issues of inter-religious dialogue and the struggle against extremism under religious banners. It is true that Francis was not afraid to talk in public about certain fundamental things concerning religious extremism stained in the colours of Islam. In his address to the Imam, President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and members of Government and Parliament, he explicitly recalled the Christian stage of Egyptian life as a world heritage, and stated the need for the unconditional respect of inalienable human rights, such as the equality of all citizens, freedom of religion and freedom of expression, without any distinction. At the same time, (being a true liberal) he referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Chapter 3 of the 2014 Constitution of Egypt, which covers the Copts' rights for the first time ever in the history of Egypt.

In other words, the objective of the visit was achieved, from the Vatican’s point of view: the visit managed to make another step towards the Copts, bringing them closer, and also scored important points for the Pope in the eyes of Egyptian Christians as a defender of their rights.

If we look at this visit today, we believe that it should not be perceived within the usual rivalry between Moscow and Rome for the souls of Christians and the influence in the Christian world. In any case, not only in this respect. In recent years, all the Christian churches have faced the same challenges that were mentioned in the Joint Declaration of the Pope and the Coptic Patriarch, namely, the aggressive imposition of global neo-liberal “values”, as well as the attempts of certain political forces to completely destroy the Christian presence in the Middle East, where it originated, by the hands of the Muslim Sunni fanatics. These phenomena are pushing all the Christian churches toward rapprochement, and it is no longer important who is heading this movement. In this context, we pay attention to the proximity of the points stated during the visit of the Pope to Cairo and the Joint Declaration of February 13, 2016, promulgated after the meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow and the All Russia Cyril in Havana. Both documents, with varying degrees of detail and deepening in theological issues, point out one thing: the need for Christians around the world to jointly resist the new challenges and threats that are now truly existential for Christianity.

Let us recall a few words from the Havana Declaration: “Our eyes are directed, first of all, towards those regions of the world where Christians are being persecuted. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa, our brothers and sisters in Christ are being exterminated as whole families, villages, and cities. Their temples are subjected to barbaric destruction and plunder, shrines are desecrated, and monuments are demolished. In Syria, Iraq, and other countries of the Middle East, we are painfully watching the mass exodus of Christians from the land where the spread of our faith began and where they have lived peacefully since the apostolic times together with other religious communities.” We are urging the international community to act immediately to prevent the further displacement of Christians from the Middle East. Raising our voice in defence of the persecuted Christians, we also sympathize with the sufferings of adherents of other religious traditions that are victims of the civil war, chaos, and terrorist violence.”

Therefore, the visit of Pope Francis to Cairo and his meetings with Islamic representatives, primarily with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, can also be viewed as the implementation of the provisions of the Havana Declaration, including its call for the initiation of an inter-religious dialogue, and, thus, we should welcome it. Apparently, we are witnessing a historical process, which Christians began to overcome their millennial contradictions on a number of theological issues that has long prevented the joint protection of their spiritual values. Obviously, if Christians find a common vision of the foundations of their religion and get a new spiritual energy that will help them reach new horizons, it will be much easier to build a dialogue with the newly reopened Islamic ummah. Today, in the face of aggressive atheism of neoliberals and radical Islam, it becomes a matter of physical survival for them.

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