

What We Can Learn From Coptic Christians

Although I am a critic of Catholic theology, I commend Pope Francis for recognizing the 21 Coptic Christians murdered by ISIS as true Christian martyrs. "They were killed for the simple fact that they were Christians," said Francis. He went on to say, "The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ!"

The video of their execution shows that some of them were repeating the words, "Lord Jesus Christ" as they were being beheaded. And on an Arabic Christian TV program the brother of two of the martyrs told of asking his mother, an uneducated woman in her 60s, what she would do if she saw the ISIS member who killed her sons pass on the street? He said she replied, "I would ask God to open his eyes and then invite him into my home.'"

Who are these Coptic Christians? And what can we learn from them?

The Coptic Church of Egypt traces its beginning to Mark, author of the second Gospel, who according to tradition, took the gospel to Egypt during the reign of Nero who was emperor from A.D. 54-68. Also, according to tradition, Mark was martyred for his faith on May 8, A.D. 68 in Alexandria, Egypt after being dragged by Roman soldiers through the city's streets and alleys.

Nonetheless, the gospel took root in Egypt, and Alexandria became an early center of Christianity, producing some of the great leaders and theologians of the early church such as

Clement, Origen and Athanasius, sometimes called the Father of Orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, persecution and martyrdom have been a part of the Coptic Church's experience since its inception. This persecution has come from various quarters including Roman Emperors, Byzantine rulers, the Catholic Church and Islam. They have been persecuted by practically every Egyptian ruler.

But instead of being melancholic and morose, Coptic Christians take pride in the persecution they have endured through the centuries. On their website is a statement that says, "Perhaps the greatest glory of the Coptic Church is its cross." To emphasize their pride in their cross of suffering, the Copts have created a calendar called the Calendar of the Martyrs that honors those who have suffered and died for their faith throughout history.

Although losing a loved one in such a horrid manner must be an emotionally wrenching experience, it would not be a theological shock, causing them to question God and His goodness, as it would be for Christians in America and the West. They understand that suffering for their faith is the price they will pay for being a true follower of Jesus. In fact, the brother of two of the martyrs spoke of how proud they were of these men and their faith and how his family rejoiced knowing they had entered the kingdom of God.

Nonetheless, the situation in the Middle East should help us appreciate the unique religious liberties we have known in America since its inception, and should serve as a reminder that we must be on guard so as not to lose these liberties. As someone has noted, "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom." We as Christians in America must, therefore, not be intimidated and silenced concerning the erosion of our religious liberties.

To illustrate this, I am editing and adapting the well-known statement by the Lutheran pastor, Martin Neimoller (1892–1984), about the consequences of the silence of the German people following the Nazis rise to power. I have adapted it to fit what could be a reality in America unless Christians pray and voice their convictions.

First they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out,

Because I am not a Jew.

Then they came for the Mormons, and I did not speak out,

Because I am not a Mormon.

Then they came for the Baptists, and I did not speak out,

Because I am not a Baptist.

Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak out,

Because I am not a Catholic.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

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