

Michael Youssef: What American Christians Just Don't Understand About Persecution

On Friday morning, the media exploded with news of the fourth major ISIS attack against the Coptic community in a span of six months. But Egyptian-American preacher Michael Youssef says Coptic Christians are more passionate than ever about their faith. And that's something the networks aren't talking about.

At the World Summit for the Defense of Persecuted Christians earlier this month, MRC Culture spoke with Atlanta-based Youssef about his recent visit to Egypt. Even after the devastating Palm Sunday bombings in Alexandria and Tanta, Youssef had only good news about how the Christian community is coping.

"There were 2 million more Christians in churches on Easter and Good Friday than the previous year," he rejoiced. "And this is the message they wanted to communicate to the terrorists: 'Kill us all, and that's fine by us. We're not afraid of you.'"

Youssef then explained the counterintuitive effects of persecution.

"This is the one thing I think so many Christians in America don't understand: That persecution strengthens and makes believers more passionate about their faith than easy Christianity," he added.

This counterintuitive resilience was beautifully demonstrated by Samira Fahmi, an Egyptian widow who lost her husband Naseem

in the Palm Sunday bombings. In an interview with ONTV News, Samira displayed stunning forgiveness toward her husband's attackers, shocking Muslim correspondent Amr Adeeb.

So how are Coptic Christians coping? Youssef summed it up with joy: "They are absolutely rejoicing! They all want to suffer for Christ if that is what they are going to have to do," he concluded. "So God is blessing them!"

The State of Religious Freedom in Egypt

Although ISIS violence has been rising, there is some cause for hope in Egypt.

According to the 2017 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), religious freedom conditions actually have improved somewhat over the past year. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has condemned sectarian attacks and worked to root out ISIS cells.

In Youssef's opinion, this is one reason why American broadcast networks haven't used the word "genocide" to describe what is happening to Egypt's Copts.

"Generally a genocide is something that is orchestrated by people in authority," he explained, noting that ISIS is a group of radicals that actually hate the Egyptian government.

"The government is not causing genocide among Christians," he continued. "The government, and the president, President el-Sisi, loves Christians. He goes to their churches on Christmas and Easter, and expresses real love for them and they return that love."

Awareness Is Vital, But News Isn't Enough

By visiting Egypt two weeks after the Palm Sunday attack, Pope Francis focused the world's eyes on the problems facing Egyptian Christians. But even when the media's focus moves on, persecution still lingers.

Although awareness of persecution is vital, Youssef stressed, helping Christians abroad doesn't end there.

"We've got to cease to be self-centered, we've got to cease to be myopic in our view of ourselves as Christians and begin to be informed—who, what, where," the pastor stressed.

But after that, churches need to mobilize through prayer and support of ministries doing work to meet the practical needs of those suffering.

"The least you can do is pray," Youssef concluded. "Then find a ministry that is doing something about helping the persecuted and get plugged in."

{eoa}