

JERUSALEM PATRIARCH RULES OUT APOLOGY TO SHENOUDA

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Jerusalem—In exclusive remarks to Al-Masry Al-Youm, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Theophilos III, says he is unfazed by the withdrawal of the Coptic Church from the Middle East Council of Churches in a dispute that has pitted two of the oldest Christian churches against each other.

"The council doesn't necessarily include everybody," Theophilos said when asked about Pope Shenouda's recent decision to withdraw the Coptic church from the council. "We aren't forcing anyone to join by force. Everyone participates by freewill, not force."

But in an interview at the Patriarchate's seat in the old city of occupied East Jerusalem, Theophilos, a co-president of the council, took pains to stress that the dispute was neither doctrinal nor political in nature, but rather limited to his and other church leaders' demands that the secretary of the council, Guirguis Saleh, a Copt who has served for the last seven years, resign. This, he said, is necessary due to what Theophilos alleges was mismanagement during Saleh's tenure that, the Greek clergyman says, has paralyzed the ecumenical grouping.

Theophilos denied accusing the Coptic church or any of its representatives of "treason" during the council's latest meeting in Amman on 19 April, saying Egyptian media reports to that effect were "a smear to discredit me because I took the initiative and put the knife on the knot" by calling for Saleh to step down.

"I swear I never used that word, never. I asked the secretary-

general in a kind way, 'Mr. Guirgis, if you want to help the council, consider a sacrifice and this is to offer your resignation,'" Theophilos said. He said he would not apologize for the reported treason remark, as demanded by Pope Shenouda, since he had never said it.

Theophilos's account of what happened at the Amman meeting is that after his remarks to Saleh, Bishop Bishoi, the secretary of the Coptic Holy Synod, said the request for Saleh's resignation could not be accepted since he had been appointed by Pope Shenouda.

"I said in responses: 'Is secretary-general a private enterprise? Is he for the council or for your church alone?'" Theophilos said.

Despite the apparent acrimony at the meeting, Theophilos praised Bishop Bishoi, who is seen as a likely successor to the elderly Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa of the Holy See of St. Mark. Theophilos called Bishoi "highly respected" and a "serious man involved in dialogue."

Of the pope he said, "I have respect for him. He is a very interesting and highly respected church leader."

But Theophilos was direct and persistent in his criticism of Saleh's handling of council affairs. Saleh could not be reached for comment on Theophilos's allegations of mismanagement. "In the course of his tenure he proved to be unsuitable," the Greek clergyman said.

The council, Theophilos said, "became a club. Everyone was promoting people for financial benefits rather than qualifications. It became a club looking after private interests and the Copts were playing a major role. Other churches, because of the sensitivity did not want to face the problem in a straightforward way. No one wanted to disturb relations with Pope Shenouda. But when the council collapsed, someone had to come to the rescue of this council."

"I am trying for the reform and restructuring of this council," said the former school teacher, who grew up in the narrow streets of Jerusalem's Old City.

"I would like to see it come back to its original purpose, to promote understanding and ecclesiastical unity through theological dialogue, especially right now in the circumstances the Middle East is passing, in order to support the needs of the Christians living in the Middle East in a non-Christian social context."

Bernard Sabella, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council who is executive secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches' department of service for Palestinian refugees, voiced regret over the Coptic-Greek Orthodox feud. "The idea of the council is to bring together all churches in the spirit of ecumenism. We pray this troublesome episode will be overcome. An active council is much needed for the communities themselves and relations with other religions and for the kind of future churches could contribute to in the countries of the Middle East. It is important to get the council back on its feet. May the Holy Spirit guide all of them."

The Coptic church has at times played a substantial role in council affairs. His Excellence Anba Samuel was a founding member of the council in 1974. Anba Samuel was assassinated along with President Sadat in October 1981. Pope Shenouda served as a president of the council previously. Saleh, a theologian and professor, became secretary-general in 2003 and was elected to a second term in 2007.

The council's official website lists among its key themes as strengthening "a sense of national unity, confidence, continuity and purpose within the fellowship of its member churches."

It brings together 27 (now 26) churches from countries as varied as Sudan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Algeria and Iran. The

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria is a member within the Eastern Orthodox (Chalcedonian) family of churches, that also includes the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem. The Coptic Orthodox Church was until now in the council's Oriental Orthodox family of churches.

This is not the first time there has been acrimony between the Coptic and Greek Orthodox churches or their antecedents. In a far more serious fracture in 451 AD, at the Council of Chalcedon, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria differed over the nature of Christ with the Eastern Orthodox and Western Churches. The schism led to the formation of the Coptic church as a distinct body.

Originally published at Al-Masry Al-Youm

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Original          article          url:
  http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/jerusalem-patriarch-spe
aks-out-coptic-greek-split
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