

# 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.

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## **INTERVIEW OF H.B. THEOFILOS III TO AL-RAI ABOUT THE US-ISLAMIC WORLD FORUM IN DOHA-QATAR**

On the first day of the Forum, His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III gave an interview to the newspaper Al- Rai. In this interview His Beatitude expressed optimism as far as the success of the 7<sup>th</sup> Forum of Doha resulting in a new beginning towards forming a strong partnership on the basis of mutual respect with the Islamic world.

His Beatitude noted during his interview that the state of Qatar ensured the proper environment which guarantees the success of this Forum wishing for all the participants to take steady and decisive steps towards a new vision which will eliminate the dark memories of the past.

**Al-Rai:                   Your Beatitude, how do you see your participation in the Forum between the US and the Islamic worlds?**

HB:                   We arrived from Jerusalem, after receiving the invitation to participate at this significant Forum which we consider necessary for all leaders of the world in order to meet and discuss many issues of their concern and which will eradicate any negative impression and prejudice from others. In order to achieve this goal we must first familiarize ourselves with each other by approaching each other and attending meetings. We would like to express our gratitude to the state of Qatar which we have visited numerous times in the past and is a good example for developing dialogue and transparency. We also had the honour of meeting with his Highness Sheikh Hamand Ben Khalifah A- Thani. In the state of Qatar there is a Christian community that enjoys all its rights and respect, which is solid proof of the respect and love that prevails in this country.

**Al-Rai:                   What is represented through Your participation in this Forum?**

HB:                   We participate in this significant Forum with regard to politics and religion, as this is a very important issue. We also participated in two other Forums (sessions in this Forum?) and we have declared Our opinion on many issues. Today politics and diplomacy are in great need of spiritual guidance and advice.

**Al-Rai: Even on religious issues?**

HB: Truly, we must separate religion and politics as to their activities. The clergy should not become politicians and vice versa. However politics and religion must co-operate. Indeed our cultural heritage is based on religion, and has shaped our civilization, therefore politicians are influenced by religion. Either way religion is something positive, not negative.

**Al- Rai: Your Beatitude, according to your understanding how will this Forum contribute to the understanding of the different points of view of the participants and Your meeting with them?**

HB: This helps decisively, not only between American and the Islamic worlds, but between all religions. As you know the conflicts and disputes have very deep roots in history. As for Jerusalem where We come from, it is a unique place of different religions and cultures. It is a place where the three religions share and it is a good model for coexistence regardless of mistaken perceptions which followers of either religion may have for the others.

**Al-Rai: What steps should be followed in order to remove these**

**mistaken perceptions?**

HB: I believe the first step is dialogue and secondly how to work in order to promote the trust between us. We are clergy and having lived in Jerusalem for 40 years believe that this is the core of the problem, the lack of confidence between the opposing parties.

**AL-Rai: Your Beatitude, what are your activities in promoting trust between the followers of these religions.**

HB: Certainly we protect the rights of other religions, we respect them, and ask for this respect in return. Also we work for the spread of knowledge and understanding between all, because ignorance is the main reason for all bad impressions, prejudice of others and the lack of understanding between them.

**Al-Rai: Taking into account that You come from Jerusalem what is Your opinion about the excavations that the Israelis are undertaking?**

HB: In Jerusalem there are many religions, and Jerusalem accommodates them all, not only the three great monotheistic religions Jerusalem is described as the heart of the World, and a very important city to the whole world. Therefore when we see that a religion in the Holy land is exposed to harm or damage we demand and ask for it to be respected. In My opinion all Holy places must be respected by everybody.

**Al-Rai: In the domestic sector, how do you deal with the Palestinian situation?**

HB: We issue announcements where we condemn these acts. We are against any attack on the religion of others and we do not accept certain religions to be exposed to danger from any other religions.

**Al-Rai: What are the other obstacles for the mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians?**

HB: As I mentioned before it is sometimes the prejudice

and the extremism coming from all religions. I don't believe that religion is a source of violence but the opposite. However there are some people who use religion to promote private agendas and various ideologies, and this is a big problem.

**Al-Rai: How do you explain the wars waged by the US in the world and especially against Islamic countries, which reinforce the feelings of hatred between religions?**

HB: Allow me to say that everybody knows the truth of what is happening, and the world has become like a small village due to globalization and international communications. The only manner of exit from these main crises is to understand each other and at the same time to be realistic. We condemn any kind or form of violence irrespective of where it originates. However we must keep in mind that we are human beings and not perfect, that we may make mistakes which create many problems.

**Al-Rai: Do you agree with the term used for war as "a crusade" against the Muslims?**

HB: We must say this, whatever is happening is the result of ignorance from both sides, and because people are no longer interested in religions in our day, this leads to a situation in which there is a lack of respect towards the other side. Now the politicians and the decision makers are convinced that religion plays an important role in social and political life, although in the past this role has been neglected. Therefore we can say that religion and politics influence each other very much.

Following the interview, His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III escorted by the Patriarchal Representative in



Qatar Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Makarios and by Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Ieronimos who is serving in Fhes of Jordan, visited and surveyed the works carried out at the church of the Patriarchate in Doha, which is under construction. This church is in honour of Saint Isaac the Syrian and the Great Martyr Saint George. His Beatitude congratulated Rev. Arch. Makarios for his efforts to complete this work.

**Chief Secretary's Office**