

# WITNESSES TO FREEDOM

## COPTIC MARTYRS

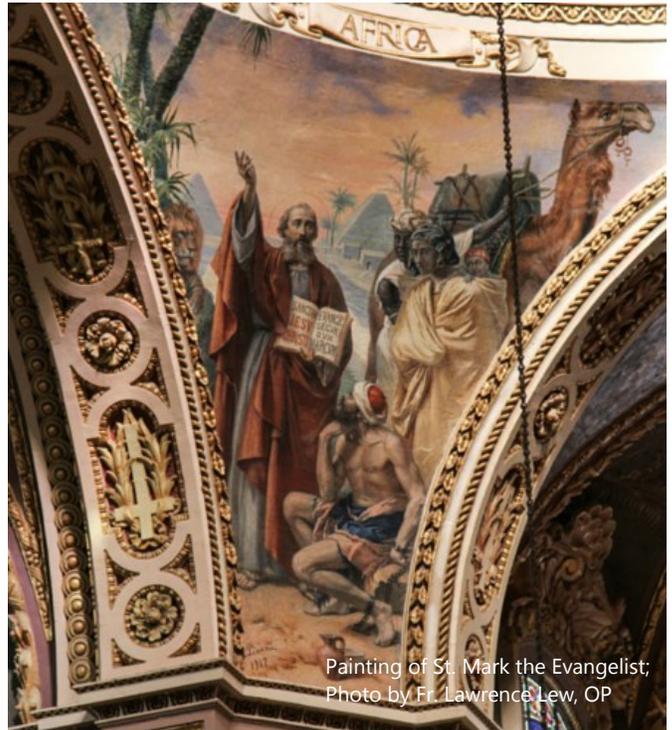
*"The blood of our Christian brothers is testimony that cries out."*

On February 15, 2015, a shocking 5-minute video aired showing 21 men in orange jumpsuits being forced to the ground in Libya and then beheaded by ISIS-affiliated militants. Their only crime – they were Coptic Christians, "people of the cross, followers of the hostile Egyptian Church." These men, like many others, were migrants from Egypt, working in Libya. Ostensibly, they were being killed to avenge the alleged kidnapping of Muslim women by the Egyptian Coptic Church, an outrageous charge, but then ISIS needs little excuse for its brutality.

Tensions between Coptic Christians and Muslims are not new, despite the fact that Copts make up about ten percent of Egypt's population. Coptic Christians trace their origins back to the Apostle Mark, whom they believe came to Egypt around AD 42 and founded what became a thriving Christian community in Alexandria. By the third century, the Church in Alexandria was considered one of four Apostolic Sees and the oldest Christian church in Africa.

Under Muslim rule, Copts have often faced discrimination and have been required to pay special taxes. Since 2010, attacks against Copts seem to have increased. In 2011, a Coptic church was demolished, and when Coptic Christians took to the streets in Cairo to protest, they were met with tanks and riot police. At least 28 Copts were killed and hundreds injured. In 2013, following violence that left five Copts and one Muslim dead in a northern town, security forces and local residents laid siege to St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo where hundreds of Copts attended the funeral for the slain Copts. This led to more injuries and protests that were indicative of the distrust between the Muslim Brotherhood government led by President Mohamed Morsi and the Coptic community.

But this persecution pales in comparison to the brutality inflicted by ISIS-affiliated militants who beheaded the 21



Painting of St. Mark the Evangelist;  
Photo by Fr. Lawrence Lew, OP

men in Libya. In publicizing this video, the militants wanted to send "A Message Signed in Blood to the Nation of the Cross" and warned that "we will fight you all together until the war lays down its burdens... The sea you've hidden Sheik Osama bin Laden's body in, we swear to Allah we will mix it with your blood."

Reaction to the beheadings came swiftly. The White House condemned the "wanton killing of innocents," saying ISIS's "barbarity knows no bounds." United Nations Security Council members likewise denounced "the heinous and cowardly apparent murder" of the 21 Egyptians. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared a seven day period of national mourning, calling the 21 Egyptians "martyrs". On February 21, 2015, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, said the 21 would be commemorated as martyr saints. Pope Francis called the killings "barbaric," lamenting, "They only said 'Jesus help me...'. The blood of our Christian brothers is testimony that cries out. Be they Catholic, Orthodox, Lutherans, it doesn't matter. They're Christian."

**Coptic Martyrs,  
pray for all Christians who suffer persecution!**



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