

21 Men Chose Death Over Renouncing Their Christian Faith. Why?

On February 12, 2015 occurred one of the most dramatic of the many atrocities committed by the Islamic State at the height of its power.

Kneeling in orange jump suits on the shores of the Mediterranean near the Libyan city of Sirte were 21 men – 20 Egyptian Copts and one Ghanian. Behind each of them was an ISIS militant with a knife. They were all beheaded. All this was captured on a video which ISIS posted on social media.

The terrorists gave the men a chance: renounce Christianity and embrace Islam. Or die. They chose to die. Captured on the video were the last words of some of the men, “Ya Rabb Yeshua!” (“O Lord Jesus!”).

The Ghanian, Matthew Ayariga, was not a Copt. Some accounts say that he was already a Christian, others that he was not but said, “Their God is my God”, knowing that he would be killed.

ISIS created many Christian martyrs, but the vile pageantry and the stark choice given to these men have made their deaths a powerful symbol of fidelity to Christ.

Now Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, and Pope Tawadros II, the head of the Coptic Church, have made another historic gesture. Despite 1600 years of separation over a doctrinal issue, they have united in honouring these men as martyrs.

Tawadros II officially canonized the 21 shortly after their deaths. And earlier this month Francis took the unusual step

of enrolling them in the Catholic Church's official list of saints, the [Martyrology](#). From now on these Coptic martyrs will be formally remembered in the prayer of the Catholic Church.

This raised some eyebrows, because the Copts and Catholics have had ancient doctrinal differences over the nature of Christ. But the two churches have been in close ecumenical dialogue since Pope Paul VI and Coptic Pope Shenouda III signed a "Joint Christological Declaration" in 1973. In recent years, [after close study of the issue by both sides](#), they have concluded that their differences may be largely a matter of terminology and not of substance.

More importantly for Francis, though, was a theme dear to his heart: "ecumenism of blood". [As he said the day after](#) the horror of the murders was revealed:

Today I read about the execution of those 21 or 22 Coptic Christians. Their only words were: "Jesus, help me!". They were killed simply for the fact that they were Christians... 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. As we recall these brothers who died only because they confessed Christ, I ask that we encourage each another to go forward with this ecumenism which is giving us strength, the ecumenism of blood. The martyrs belong to all Christians.

The word "pontiff" means bridge-builder. The current Pontiff has certainly built bridges by enrolling the Sirte martyrs in the list of Catholic saints – and not just with the Coptic Church.

One of the strongest criticisms of Pope Francis, whether justified or not, is lack of attention to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Africa by Islamic

fundamentalists.

As [Vatican expert John L. Allen Jr.](#) points out, it satisfies both progressives and conservatives. Although Islamophobia is a touchy subject for most progressives, bringing “outsiders” into the church is one of their priorities. So they have welcomed the incorporation of Coptic saints. Likewise, conservatives constantly highlight anti-Christian persecution. They, too, are happy.

In a strange way, the monstrous cruelty of these deaths is a sign of hope. In the year 197 AD the Christian apologist Tertullian declared triumphantly: “The blood [of the martyrs] is the seed of Christians.” And he went on to say: “Don’t you see that [Christians], thrown to the beasts so that they deny the Lord, do not allow themselves to be defeated? Don’t you see that the more they are punished, the more others appear?”

If Christians are still ready to die for their faith in the 21st century, the Church, despite its weaknesses, is in no danger of dying out.

The incredible faith and courage of these men – just ordinary workers, not people of privilege and rank – should be a wake-up call to Millennials. Is there anything, is there anyone, for whom they are prepared to give their lives?

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