

COPTIC RELATIONS WITH ROME

In antiquity, the pope and Church of Alexandria stood in close and friendly relations with the pope and Church of Rome. Quite often both churches formed an alliance against New Rome (Constantinople) and its patriarch. The early synods of Alexandria were [recognized](#) by Rome: DEMETRIUS I against ORIGEN (231); PETER II against MELITIUS of Lycopolis (306); ALEXANDER I against ARIUS (318 or 321); ATHANASIUS I against the [ARIANISM](#) of the Eusebians (339); Athanasius, who clarified the terminology of *ousia* and *hypostasis*, thus initiating the reconciliation of the Semi-Arians (362); CYRIL I against NESTORIUS (430).

However, in rejecting the Council of CHALCEDON (451) the Copts (in the Synod under TIMOTHY II Aelurus, and under PETER III MONGUS) initiated a complete break with Rome. This lasted until the time of the Crusades when unsuccessful negotiations for reunion were attempted under the Coptic pope CYRIL III (1235-1243). The reunion of the Copts with Rome during the Council of Florence in 1442 and its acceptance by the Coptic pope JOHN XI (1427-1452) found no support among the Coptic people. Occasionally until 1582, Rome did consider the Church of Alexandria as Uniate (see FLORENCE, COPTS AT THE COUNCIL OF).

Between the Council of Florence (1439-1445) and the end of the nineteenth century, the Roman church held a rigorous doctrine on the unity and unicity of the church: the nature of schism as the separation from the Church of Rome, and the union as the full and unconditional subjection to the pope and the Holy Roman Apostolic See.

Thus, for example, on 20 April 1590, Pope Sixtus V wrote to the Coptic Pope GABRIEL VIII of Alexandria that “he and his flock were separated from the unity of the Holy See as a branch which has lost all its sap . . . and could not bear fruit which would be worthy of eternal beatitude,” and therefore he would have to bring his flock to obedience and subjection to

the Roman pontiff, who is the Vicar of Christ. Sometimes the popes of Rome preferred to designate the Eastern churches as “nations” (e.g., Pope Innocent XII in his *breve* to the Coptic Patriarch JOHN XVI, 3 March 1697).

In 1560, two Coptic priests went to Rome as delegates of the Coptic church to negotiate terms of reunion. Then Pope Pius IV (1559-1565) sent two Jesuits, Christoforo Rodriguez and Giovanni Battista Eliano, to the Coptic Pope GABRIEL VII (1525-1568). This mission brought no positive results, for the Roman representatives demanded of the Copts and their pope unconditional subjection to the pope of Rome with all that was implied at the time. The Copts refused this type of subjection, for it was alien to their understanding of church unity.

In 1582, another attempt at reunion with Rome was made by the Coptic pope JOHN XIV (1570-1585) whose intentions were sincere and serious. He requested Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) to send legates from Rome to negotiate the terms of reunion. When the two papal legates, Giovanni Battista Eliano and Francesco Sasso, arrived, he convoked a synod of the Coptic church to discuss the matter.

However, when [John XIV](#) died suddenly in mysterious circumstances, the two legates were imprisoned by Turkish authorities as foreign spies. They were released only after a ransom of 5,000 gold pieces was paid. Eliano negotiated with the new patriarch, GABRIEL VIII (1586-1601), a profession of [faith](#) that did not include a formula of “the two natures in Christ”; this seems to have found no support in Rome. However, he assumed a very rigorous and negative position with respect to the Coptic rites, in which he found many “superstitions.”

On 15 January 1595, Clement VIII, in the presence of twenty- four cardinals, received in audience five representatives of Gabriel VIII. In his name they made a profession of faith (the formula of Gregory XIII) professing obedience to the pope of Rome and abjuring “all they held

until now which was opposed to the rite of the Holy Roman Church.” On 28 June 1597, the representatives of Gabriel VIII returned with ratified documents of reunion and were granted an audience with Clement VIII.

The documents of this reunion did not grant the Coptic church sufficient autonomy and demanded of the Coptic patriarch a promise of obedience to the pope of Rome. In a letter of 7 October 1602 to Gabriel VIII (who had died on 14 May 1601) Clement VIII demanded “due obedience,” for the Alexandrian Church of Saint Mark was of Petrine origin and therefore had to be especially closely tied to Rome. The union of 1595-1597 remained ineffective.

In 1576, Pope Gregory XIII had established the Greek [College](#) in Rome with the stipulation that the students be instructed in Greek language, literature, theology, and ecclesiastical rites, and he prohibited the use of Latin. All this was soon ignored, and the Greek College became a tool of the Latinization of the Greeks and other Eastern Christians, including the Copts. In 1602, Pope Clement tried to organize an “Egyptian College” in Rome, but this plan did not materialize.

Under the Coptic popes MATTHEW IV (1660-1675) and JOHN XVI (1676-1718) discussions concerning reunion with Rome continued but without results. The numerous negotiations with the Coptic popes concerning reunion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remained fruitless. The Copts wanted reunion in love and rejected both strict legal subjection to Rome and the demand that they give up traditions not exactly consonant with Roman customs. In one instance, the [Congregation](#) for the Propagation of the [Faith](#) decided in a 1625 decree that the Sunday observance laws for attendance at the Liturgy also applied to the Copts. However, this was unknown in the Coptic customs and tradition.

In 1623, Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) wanted to reestablish contact with the Coptic church and sent Franciscan missionaries headed by Father

Paulo di Lodi to work among the Copts. Then in 1630, the Capuchin father Joseph of Paris established several missions in the Levant, among them one in Cairo under the successful direction of Father Agathangelo of Vendôme. The Coptic pope Matthew III (1634-1649) opened all his churches to the friars, and Agathangelo gave spiritual conferences in the Coptic monasteries of the Lower Thebaid.

The greatest obstacle to reunion was the immoral conduct of the Catholics residing in Egypt, especially those of the French Consulate (“synagogue of Satan”). Both the complaints of Matthew III that “the Roman [Catholic](#) Church in this country is a brothel” and the appeals of Agathangelo to the prefect of the Propaganda [Congregation](#) to excommunicate the offenders remained fruitless. Agathangelo departed to Ethiopia and to martyrdom.

In 1697, the Friars Minor of the Observance were placed in charge of the Apostolic Prefecture of Upper Egypt. Only after 1720 did the Coptic mission have modest success. On 9 August 1739, Athanasius, the Coptic bishop of Jerusalem (vicar general of the Coptic pope with residence in Cairo), secretly made a [Catholic](#) profession of [faith](#) before RUFA’IL AL-TUKHI and Justus Maraghi, two Uniate Coptic priests educated in Rome. Al-Tukhi brought Athanasius’ profession of faith to Rome; and on 4 August 1741, Pope Benedict XIV granted Athanasius jurisdiction over all the Catholic Copts (about 2,300). Athanasius hardly used these faculties, and then returned to the Coptic church.

On 3 June 1744, the pope Benedict XIV appointed Justus Maraghi as vicar general, who died in 1748. Then the prefect of the Latin Rite Reformed Franciscans received jurisdiction over the Uniate Copts, a circumstance that considerably undermined the Uniate cause.

In 1758 the Coptic archbishop, Anthony Fulayfil, became Catholic, and in 1761 Rome appointed him the first Coptic vicar apostolic. Rome ruled the [Catholic](#) Copts through apostolic vicars until the second erection of the

Coptic Catholic Patriarchate of Alexandria in 1895.

The eighteenth century was characterized by confusion marked by lack of understanding. During the first half of the eighteenth century, Franciscan missionaries in Egypt demanded that the [Catholic](#) Copts burn their books, and many missionaries actually ridiculed and misrepresented the Eastern rites, tradition, and customs.

An extreme case occurred when the prefect of the Reformed Franciscans bluntly told the Coptic [Catholic](#) priests that their “prayers were going to the devil and not to God” (26 September 1805; Metzler, 1960, p. 377). However, during this period the Uniate Copt Rufa’il al-Tukhi (d. 1787) was editing and printing Coptic liturgical books in Rome, and he was appointed the ordaining bishop for Coptic seminarians in Rome.

The popes of Rome generally had no knowledge of the particular customs and laws of the Copts, and usually followed either Latin or Byzantine practices and canons in their dealing with the [Catholic](#) Copts. For example, Pope Benedict XIV, in the Apostolic Instruction *Eo quamvis tempore* (4 May 1745) to the [Catholic](#) Copts, relied on Greek sources, and so thought that Oriental clergy could marry before but not after ordination as [deacons](#)—but the Coptic custom and tradition permitted ordained deacons to marry.

Furthermore, the Congregation for the Propagation of the [Faith](#) always kept the [Catholic](#) Copts in strictest obedience and dependence, much more than any other Eastern Catholic church. This is illustrated by the fact that after their return to Egypt, the Coptic priests educated in Rome were usually given faculties for three years only “in order to keep them in a stricter dependence” (Decree of 1736). The Roman Catholic missionaries (and possibly also the Uniate clergy) hoped to win over the Coptic pope JOHN XVII (1726-1745) and his successor MARK VII (1745-1769) to the cause of union.

They were unsuccessful because joining the union was considered becoming a “Franc” (i.e., an alien with French culture). However, several of the clergy did make a secret profession of [Catholic](#) faith, the value of which was questionable. On 15 March 1790, the Congregation for the Propagation of the [Faith](#) fortified the decree of 1729, which prohibited the Coptic Catholic priests from having intercommunion with the non-Catholics. In the same decree, the Congregation stipulated that absolution could be granted to converts to the Catholic church only after they abjured errors and they professed the faith of Urban VIII. This definitively settled the thorny question of intercommunion that had been under discussion among the missionaries.

The creation of the Coptic [Catholic](#) Patriarchate in 1824 increased the tensions and hostilities between the Coptic and the Roman churches. (On the establishment of the Patriarchate and subsequent events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to 1971, see COPTIC CATHOLIC CHURCH.)

After the death of the Coptic pope CYRIL VI on 9 March 1971, SHENOUDA III became the patriarch and pope of Alexandria on 14 November 1971. In May 1973, he visited the Vatican and met with Pope Paul VI. They issued a common declaration that ended fifteen centuries of quarrels: the doctrine of the two natures in Christ was agreed upon (*Acta Apostolicae sedis* 65, 1973, pp. 299-301; cf. also pp. 314-22). On this occasion, Shenouda III brought part of the relics of Saint Athanasius to Rome for the sixteenth centenary of the saint. This was a gesture graciously following upon the 1968 gift of relics of Saint Mark from Rome to Egypt.

In 1974, a commission for dialogue was established at Cairo between the Vatican and Orthodox Copts. In June 1974, Shenouda III established the Marseille-[Toulon](#) and Paris eparchies in France for Coptic French nationals. On 2 June 1979, Pope John Paul II received legates of the Coptic Orthodox Church and encouraged them to work toward

reunion—praying “with my brothers the bishops and the faithful of the [Catholic](#) Churches in Egypt” for full ecclesial communion.

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