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Responses to Information Requests

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10 October 2013

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Egypt and Syria: Beliefs and practices of Coptic Christians in Egypt and Syriac Orthodox Christians in Syria, including sacraments, holy days, symbols and official documents; history and structure of the Coptic Church and Syriac Church, including leadership

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Oriental Orthodox Churches

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a Board Member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada stated that the Oriental Orthodox family of churches has been a "distinct church body" since the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, when they "took a different position over Christological theology from that of the Eastern Orthodox Church" (3 Oct. 2013). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an Anglican Priest based in Montreal also said that in 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon, there was a debate about who Christ was, in which all churches except for the Oriental Orthodox family of churches agreed that Christ had two natures, human and divine, while Oriental Orthodox churches believed that Christ was of one nature (30 Sept. 2013). He added that many Oriental Orthodox Christians are unaware of this schism (Anglican Priest 8 Oct. 2013).

The list below is sourced from an article by Geevarghese Mar Osthathios on the World Council of Churches website (2002), and a webpage on Oriental Orthodox Churches available through the Pluralism Project of Harvard University (15 Mar. 2005). These sources indicate that the following churches are Oriental Orthodox churches:

- Syriac Orthodox;
- Coptic Orthodox;
- Ethiopian Orthodox;
- Armenian Orthodox;
- Eritrean Orthodox;
- Indian (Malankara) Orthodox.

2. Coptic Orthodox Christianity and Syriac Orthodox Christianity

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member stated that Syriac and Coptic Orthodox churches are "sister churches" and that "their congregations are considered to be in the same exact faith" (3 Oct. 2013). Sources indicate that the beliefs of Copts are the same as the beliefs of Syriac Orthodox Christians (Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013).

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member indicated that the "Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria is the official name" of the Coptic Church (ibid.). Sources indicate that the term "Coptic" is specific to Egyptians (Coptic Network Jan. 2006; Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013). In a telephone interview

with the Research Directorate, the president of Syrian Christians for Peace, a non-profit organization of Syrian Christians who support the "Syrian revolution for freedom and dignity" (Syrian Christians for Peace 12 July 2013), who also identifies as a Syriac Christian and an active member of the Syriac Church, indicates that people are not called "Coptic Orthodox" outside of Egypt, unless they are Egyptians living outside of Egypt (1 Oct. 2013).

In 2009, the BBC reported that the Coptic Church had expanded and had 6 to 11 million members inside Egypt and one million members outside of Egypt (25 June 2009). Sources indicate that there are Coptic Christians in Syria (Syrian Christians for Peace 8 Oct. 2013; Anglican Priest 8 Oct. 2013); however, the Anglican Priest added that there are not many (*ibid.*). The President of Syrian Christians for Peace indicated that there are "Coptic fathers in the Syriac church in Damascus" and since they follow the same beliefs, these fathers can conduct the ceremony and teach Sunday School (8 Oct. 2013).

Sources indicate that in 2000, the Holy Synod [the highest authority in the church (BBC 25 June 2009)], changed the name of the Syrian Orthodox Church to the Syriac Orthodox Church in English (Syriac Orthodox Resources n.d.a; Roberson n.d.). According to Ronald Roberson, the Associate Director of St. Paul College's Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the name change occurred to avoid confusion with Syrian nationality (*ibid.*). He added that the term "'Syriac' is mostly limited to North America" (*ibid.*)

According to the president of Syrian Christians for Peace, Syriac Christians are not always Syrian, but they mostly come from Syria and Iraq, and some have emigrated elsewhere (1 Oct. 2013). Roberson states that the Syrian Patriarchate includes "an autonomous church in India," called the "Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church," and added that there are many followers in India (n.d.). The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member said that members of the Syriac church, also referred to as the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, are spread out worldwide (3 Oct. 2013).

3. History

3.1 History of the Coptic Orthodox Church

Sources indicate that the Coptic Orthodox Church was established in Egypt by Saint Mark (Osthathios 2002; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013), an apostle and evangelist, as described by the board member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada (*ibid.*). Similarly, the Coptic Network (also known as Copt-Net), an online "Christian fellowship dedicated to the service of the emigrant Coptic Orthodox community" that was established in 1992 (Coptic Network n.d.), states that "[t]he Coptic Church is based on the teachings of Saint Mark ... one of the four evangelists..." who brought it to Egypt in the first century (Coptic Network Jan. 2006).

3.2 History of the Syriac Orthodox Church

The roots of the Syriac Orthodox Church are traced back to the Church of the Antioch (Syriac Orthodox Resources n.d.b; Roberson n.d.). Syriac Orthodox Resources, a website that "attempts to reveal the rich spiritual heritage of the Syrian Orthodox Church to the modern world" (Syriac Orthodox Resources n.d.c), states that Apostle Peter established a church in Antioch, modern-day Antakya, Turkey, in AD 37 (n.d.b). According to the Syriac Orthodox Church World Wide, Syrian Orthodox Church is "the first Church which was established in Jerusalem" (n.d.). The Patriarchate moved around to different places due to political developments until it finally settled in Syria (Syriac Orthodox Church World Wide n.d.; Syriac Orthodox Resources n.d.b).

4. Structures

4.1 Structure of the Coptic Orthodox Church

Sources indicate that the head of the Coptic Church is the Pope of Alexandria (Coptic Network Jan. 2006; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member indicated that the Pope's full title is the "Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa on the Holy See of Saint Mark," and added that the "See of Alexandria" is titular (*ibid.*). He also said that the seat of the Coptic Pope is "Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in the Abbassia District in Cairo" (*ibid.*).

The current head of the Coptic Church is Pope Tawadros the second (Coptic Orthodox Church Network n.d.a; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). He is the 118th Pope (*ibid.*; Coptic Orthodox Church Network n.d.a). Pope Tawadros became the Pope in November 2012 (*ibid.*; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). His predecessor was Pope Shenouda III, who died on 17 March 2012 (*ibid.*; Coptic Orthodox Church Network n.d.b).

BBC indicates that there are "three ranks in Coptic priesthood: Deacons, Priests and Bishops" (25 June 2009). According to the Coptic Network,

The Coptic Orthodox Church's clergy is headed by the Pope of Alexandria and includes Bishops who oversee the priests ordained in their dioceses. Both the Pope and the Bishops must be monks; they are all members of the Coptic Orthodox Holy Synod (Council), which meets regularly to oversee matters of faith and pastoral care of the Church. The Pope of the Coptic Church, although highly regarded by all Copts, does not enjoy any state of supremacy or infallibility The direct pastoral responsibility of Coptic congregations in any of these dioceses falls on Priests, who must be married and must attend the Catechetical School before being ordained. (Jan. 2006)

Similarly, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member said that if men who want to be priests wish to get married, they must marry before they are ordained (3 Oct. 2013). Only men are allowed to become priests (Coptic Orthodox Church in Canada 3 Oct. 2013; BBC 25 June 2009).

4.2 Structure of the Syriac Orthodox Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member indicated that the Syriac church is led by the "Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch" (3 Oct. 2013). Roberson states that the title for the Patriarch is the "Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East" (n.d.). The president of Syrian Christians for Peace similarly said that all Syriac churches are under one patriarch, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox, who is the Supreme Leader of the Syriac churches worldwide (1 Oct. 2013). The head of the church is currently Patriarch Ignatius Zakka Iwas [Patriarch Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas (Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern United States n.d.a)] (Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). Patriarch Zakka was enthroned on 14 September 1980 (Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013; Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern United States n.d.a). Although Patriarch Zakka is based in Damascus (Osthathios 2002; Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013), the president of Syrian Christians for Peace indicated that he is currently living in Lebanon (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member indicated that the Syriac church is "autocephalous" (3 Oct. 2013). According to the website of the Orthodox Church in America, "an 'autocephalous' Church is completely self-governing. It elects its own primate and has the right to consecrate its own Holy Chrism, among other prerogatives unique to autocephalous Churches" (Orthodox Church in America n.d.). The board member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada said that the church has 26 archdioceses and 11 patriarchal vicariates (3 Oct. 2013). The 2008 book authored by Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, states:

The Syrian Orthodox Church today consists of twenty nine dioceses - without those of India, spread in different parts of the world. Each diocese has a bishop who administers its spiritual affairs, ordains their priest, monks and deacons, consecrates altars, churches and the holy oil for baptism (not 'mooron', the chrism) and codifies bylaws for its welfare. Each diocese has an ecclesiastical board and a laymen's board to help its bishop in its administration. All the dioceses maintain the orthodox faith of the church and keep its ancient apostolic traditions. (Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas 2008, 52)

5. Beliefs

5.1 Beliefs of the Coptic Orthodox Church

The BBC indicates that the Bible is the Coptic Church's "basic scripture," although there are also other sources of faith, such as "sayings of the saints, the authenticated creeds of the holy councils, and what was recorded in the Church books" (25 June 2009).

According to the Coptic Network, Copts believe that

the Lord is perfect in His divinity, and He is perfect in His humanity, but His divinity and His humanity were united in one nature called "the nature of the incarnate word," which was reiterated by Saint Cyril of Alexandria. Copts, thus, believe in two natures "human" and "divine" that are united in one "*without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration*" (from the declaration of faith at the end of the Coptic divine liturgy). (Coptic Network Jan. 2006)

The Coptic Network indicates that "the worship of Saints is expressly forbidden by the Church; however, asking for their intercessions (e.g. Marian Praise) is central in any Coptic service" (ibid.). The Coptic Network also states that Coptic churches are named after a Patron Saint (ibid.).

According to the BBC, "Coptic churches are built facing East so that the congregation faces East in prayer" (25 June 2009).

5.2 Beliefs of the Syriac Orthodox Church

The board member of the Coptic Orthodox Church stated that Syriac Orthodox Christians use the liturgy of St. James the Apostle (Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US states that "[t]he Eucharistic Liturgy" of the Syrian Orthodox Church has "more than eighty existing anaphoras in testimony. Among these is the Liturgy of St. James ..." (n.d.c).

According to the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US, the Syriac Orthodox Church

derives her doctrine from Divine Revelation: Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition. Holy Scriptures consists of the Old and New Testaments. Holy Tradition, on the other hand, is handed down the Church from Christ to His disciples and finally the priests. And this chain of command and order is called 'Apostolic Succession.' (n.d.b)

The Syriac Orthodox Sunday School of North America lists the following beliefs on their website:

- We believe in the one true and living God, the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, and Ruler of all things. He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, and is revealed to us as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- We believe God created Heaven and earth including all life.
- We believe that man was created in the image of God, but fell into sin and is lost because of the temptation of the devil.
- We believe that Jesus Christ, the son of God, came into the world and died for us to save us from sin and give us eternal life.
- We believe that salvation is a gift of God's grace, it can not be gained by works, but freely bestowed upon all who put their trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.
- We believe in the salvation and redemption of those who believe upon the second return of Christ.
- We believe all scripture is given by the inspiration of God. (n.d.a)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6. Practices

6.1 Practices of Coptic Orthodox Christians

Sources indicate that the liturgical language of the Coptic Church is Coptic (Coptic Network Jan. 2006; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013). However, Arabic has reportedly become widely used (ibid.; BBC 25 June 2009). Local languages and the Coptic language are also used together during services (ibid.; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013).

The information in the list below is sourced from the Coptic Network (2006) and Bishop Mettaous, a scholar of Orthodox Ritual Theology (Bishop Mettaous n.d.), indicating that the following seven sacraments are observed by the Coptic Orthodox Church:

- Baptism;
- Confirmation;
- Confession;
- Holy Eucharist;
- Unction of the sick;
- Matrimony;
- Orders (Coptic Network Jan. 2006) or Priesthood (Bishop Mettaous n.d.)

Bishop Mettaous states that the four "redemptive Sacraments," which are "necessary for eternal salvation," are baptism, confirmation, confession and communion (ibid.).

The Coptic Network states the following regarding sacraments:

Baptism is performed few weeks after birth by immersing the whole body of the newborn into especially consecrated water three times. Confirmation is performed immediately after Baptism. Regular confession with a personal priest, called the father of confession, is necessary to receive the Eucharist. It is customary for a whole family to pick the same priest as a father of confession, thus, making of that priest a family counselor. Of all seven sacraments, only Matrimony cannot be performed during a fasting season. (Coptic Network Jan. 2006)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Coptic Network indicates that Copts follow the liturgies according to:

- Saint Basil, Bishop of Caesarea
- Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople
- Saint Cyril I, the 24th head of the Coptic Orthodox Church (ibid.).

In January 2006, the Coptic Network indicated that the most commonly used liturgy in the Coptic Orthodox Church was the liturgy of Saint Basil.

The BBC reports that the Coptic calendar has 13 months and is divided into the following seasons: Inundation, Sowing and Harvest (25 June 2009). Some sources indicate that Copts celebrate Christmas on 7 January (Coptic Network Jan. 2006; Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 3 Oct. 2013), while the President of Syrian Christians for Peace indicated that Copts celebrate Christmas on 6 January (8 Oct. 2013). The Anglican Priest indicated that the date of celebration of different holy days may differ depending on where churches such as the Coptic Church and Syriac Church are located and when they decide to celebrate (8 Oct. 2013).

Unless noted specifically, the information in the following list is found in the Coptic Network (Jan 2006) and the BBC profile of the Coptic Orthodox Church (25 June 2009), regarding major holy feasts:

- Annunciation;
- Christmas (Coptic Network Jan. 2006), or the Nativity of Christ (BBC 25 June 2009);
- Theophany; also called the Baptism of Christ (ibid.);
- Palm Sunday;
- Easter (Coptic Network Jan. 2006), which the BBC calls "the Feast of the Resurrection," which is preceded by Lent and considered to be "The Feast" (BBC 25 June 2009);
- Ascension;
- Pentecost.

The BBC adds that other feasts include minor feasts, monthly feasts, weekly feasts, and "feasts of the saints" (25 June 2009).

Sources indicate that there are 210 days of fasting for Copts over the year (Coptic Network Jan. 2006; BBC 25 June 2009). The BBC indicates that fasting is "a voluntary spiritual sacrifice and the Church does not insist that people fast" (ibid.). The BBC reports that fasting includes "not eating at all for a period, and then abstaining from meat, fish, dairy products and cooking fats or oil derived from animals" (ibid.). Similarly, the Coptic Network states that "[d]uring fasting, no animal products (meat, poultry, fish, milk, eggs, butter, etc.) are allowed. Moreover, no food or drink whatsoever may be taken between sunrise and sunset" (Jan. 2006).

6.2 Practices of Syriac Orthodox Christians

According to the president of Syrian Christians for Peace, Syriac Churches are conducted in the Aramaic language (1 Oct. 2013). The board member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada said that the "official and liturgical language" is Syriac, which is a dialect of Aramaic (3 Oct. 2013). The Syriac Orthodox Church World Wide similarly states that "[t]he Church and its parishioners still use Syriac-Aramaic ..." (n.d.). The information in the following list is sourced from the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US website (n.d.b) and the Syriac Orthodox Sunday School of North America (n.d.b), indicating the following seven sacraments are practiced by Syriac Orthodox Christians:

- Baptism;
- Holy Chrism, also known as Holy Myron;
- Communion/Holy Eucharist;
- Repentance;
- Anointing of the sick;
- Priesthood/Ordination;
- Marriage.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US states that Baptism, Chrism, Communion and Repentance are obligatory, while Anointing of the sick, Priesthood and Marriage are not (n.d.b). They also said that holy sacraments can only be performed by "ordained archbishops and priests who derive their authority from the Church" (Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US n.d.b). Holy Chrism is also called Holy Myron (Syriac Orthodox Sunday School of North America n.d.b). It occurs immediately after a child is Baptised (ibid.; Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US n.d.b). A priest anoints the child's head and covers the child's body with the Holy Chrism (ibid.; Syriac Orthodox Sunday School of North America n.d.b). The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch Archdiocese for the Eastern US indicates that Holy Chrism is a "separate sacrament," but it "supplements and completes the Sacrament of Holy Baptism or the spiritual second birth" (n.d.b).

The president of Syrian Christians for Peace stated that Orthodox churches, such as the Syriac church, follow the Eastern calendar, while Catholic churches follow the Western calendar (Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013). He added that, in Syria, the government closes twice for Easter, according to both of the calendars (ibid.). The president of Syrian Christians for Peace said that in Syria, Syriac churches celebrate Christmas on 25 December, but they also have a celebration related to the Baptism of Christ on 6 January (officially, the Baptism is the night of the sixth and the day of the seventh of January), which is called "alghitas" (ibid.; ibid. 8 Oct. 2013).

7. Official Documents

7.1 Official Documents Issued by the Coptic Orthodox Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada board member indicated that the church provides its members with the following documents:

- baptism certificate;
- marriage certificate;
- pre-marriage permit certificate, in order to be able to marry in the church;
- death certificate, upon request, if the Church performs the "departed procession" (3 Oct. 2013).

He also said that the church prohibits divorced members from remarrying in the church unless this person has a pre-marriage permit certificate (3 Oct. 2013). Information corroborating the documents issued by the Coptic Orthodox Church could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

7.2 Official Documents Issued by the Syriac Orthodox Church

According to the president of Syrian Christians for Peace, churches can provide legal documents if the state that the church is in accepts them (1 Oct. 2013). He said that, in Syria, Syriac churches provide documents for:

- baptism
- marriage
- divorce (Syrian Christians for Peace 1 Oct. 2013).

He added that sometimes, documents may be issued to facilitate visas and scholarships for universities, depending on a Bishop's connections and recognition with other countries (ibid.). For example, a Bishop may choose to issue a document to an embassy for the purpose of facilitating a visa or scholarship application (ibid.). Information corroborating the documents issued by the Syriac Orthodox Church could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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