

Putting the house in order

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Among his declarations to the media during the period between the altar draw earlier this month and his enthronement last Sunday, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II said that among his priority issues for the Church was to put the house in order.

The Pope did not go into detail as to how he would do that, but his declaration generated much comfort among the Copts who look forward to a modernised, state-of-the-art Church administration that would equip it to handle its massive worldwide expansion throughout the last four decades. During this space of time, the Coptic Church metamorphosed from a pastoral Church that serves the Christian faith into an active national institution with an imprint on all national issues.

There were long periods in Egypt's history when popes came and went without anyone outside the Church and congregation taking any notice. True, a number of Coptic popes have been known for public patriotic stances, reform policies, or special stances vis-à-vis the ruler; more often than not, however, popes had a tangible presence only within the Coptic circle; Muslims knew next to nothing about them.

Change came during the 1960s with Pope Kyrillos VI who enjoyed a special relation with President Gamal Abdel-Nasser. This brought the Pope—and the Church—into hitherto unprecedented limelight. In 1971, Pope Shenouda III became the 117th patriarch of the Coptic Church. Pope Shenouda's 41 years of papacy saw mammoth changes overtake Egypt and the entire world. The Church took its fair share of these changes; it spread worldwide to reach a Coptic congregation that had fanned out across the world. This brought the Church under the observant eye of the media which rushed to cover its news and follow on its activities. These years, however, also witnessed considerable challenges to the Church as a Christian institution and as a Coptic congregation that suffered agonisingly in Egypt from escalating fanaticism and discrimination. In addition, the Church found itself in the thick of political and national events on which it had to assume specific stances. On all these fronts, Pope Shenouda shone as a charismatic leader who led the Church with wisdom, insight, and a keen patriotic sense. This earned him the honour and respect of State institutions, the media, and Egypt's Muslims; but the Church's management remained centralised in Cairo, mainly run through the larger-than-life figure of Pope Shenouda III.

It is now time to modernise the administration of the Church, and establish a state-of-the-art system to handle its needs, its worldwide branching, and its various affairs on the religious, political, diplomatic, and media fronts. There is dire need to restructure the Pope's secretariat so that, while it is understandable that it should be handled by a number of the clergy, it is also necessary that they should be backed by a body of expert administrators in secretarial, media, protocol and other related affairs.

The Church is also in dire need of a modern-day communications centre that would facilitate appointments or media relations with the papacy. Those who attempted such efforts before know how difficult a task that was. The Church also needs a media centre and a professional spokesman from outside the clergy, whose role would be to connect the Church with Egyptian and international media. Under critical conditions and during crises, such a centre should save the Church from the risk of the media speculation that comes out of scarcity of information.

Since the Church has become a significant institution the every step of which comes under scrutiny, it can no longer afford to commit errors in protocol or ceremonies, and thus needs an administration for these, to be run by experts. Such experts are sure to guide the Church properly on the various occasions during which it has to deal with official bodies or authorities inside or outside Egypt.

I have cited but a few examples of what I imagine the office of the Pope, as one who sits at the head of an international institution, should be equipped to do. I hope Pope Tawadros II can achieve this soon, in order for him to move on to other important tasks.