

To His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria,
the See of St. Mark and the Copts in Diaspora

I offer Your Holiness my sincere respect as one whose heart has from his youth been full of love for the church, our blessed mother, and who has dedicated his life to the study of its authentic teaching.

When I think of Your Holiness I remember only that you stand in our time as the link with a succession of great Christian heroes, and I find myself longing that Your Holiness be surrounded by all the dignity, respect and esteem that should be your rightful due. God alone knows with how much sadness and regret I leave my vocation here in Egypt, for I say in all sincerity that I have no sense of any other vocation for my life. I am overwhelmingly sorry to be leaving my country.

I had hoped that the period of my absence abroad would be a time of peace and calm after which we would return to serve our church, which stands in urgent need of the energies of all its members. However, on the eve of my departure I was amazed to receive copies of a statement issued by the priests of the Coptic Orthodox Church in London and of a letter sent by them to several bodies and agencies, including the federation of colleges which has awarded me a fellowship. My sadness was the greater, Your Holiness, because I had not imagined that these priests would speak of me in the way they did, and specifically because they state that I have been officially placed "under the discipline of the Church" and that I am, according to the English text under a "ban", which may be understood to mean excommunication.

There is no need for me to describe to His Holiness the Pope of Alexandria, the procedures that must be followed before this solemn judgment may be passed.....

1. It is a fact that I have never been presented with a list of specific accusations.
2. It is a fact that no canonical ecclesiastical committee, such as is required by the canon law to investigate and pass judgment, has ever been formed.
3. It is a fact that I have never been called to appear before any ecclesiastical body to defend myself.
4. It is a fact that no canonical judgment has ever been passed against me.

It is therefore clear that the contents of the statement and letter I refer to have no canonical foundation. Being aware of Your Holiness's wide knowledge of canon law, and of the fact that you have written many times in the magazine "Al-Karaza" about how ecclesiastical investigations should be carried out and judgments passed, I am confident that Your Holiness, out of concern that the principles of canon law be respected, could not have given authority for the statement and letter to be issued. It seems that the situation is unclear to the priests in question or that they have received mistaken information which has been difficult for them to check because of their being so far from home.

Your Holiness is aware that after passing the secondary school certificate examinations with grades that would have gained me a place in some of the best faculties in Egyptian universities, I chose instead to study theology. You know too that I spent what were for me long years in a foreign university studying and preparing myself for the task to which I had dedicated my life. While I was abroad I wrote magisterial and doctoral dissertations clarifying the teaching of my church, and what I wrote is available for examination.

Your Holiness knows too that I returned to Egypt full of enthusiasm to take up my vocation, and I enjoyed your pastoral support for many years. I am proud to have been the deacon whom Your Holiness allowed to participate in meetings with churches and christian organisations in many parts of the world, and I value the confidence you placed in me demonstrated in my bearing your staff of office and standing beside you on official liturgical occasions. I was also given the responsibility of representing Your Holiness on committees that studied and formulated the statements and recommendations that were produced at such gatherings as I have mentioned. Through all this I heard no word of criticism or correction from Your Holiness regarding the doctrine I hold.

Your Holiness is aware that I taught in the theological seminary in Tanta, under the direct supervision of His Grace Bishop Yoannis, Bishop of Gharbiya and Secretary of the Synod of Bishops. His Grace offered no criticism or correction of the material I taught in my lectures, as he himself will affirm. I have also written numerous articles for the magazine "Al-Karaza", some at Your Holiness's explicit request, which you, as editor-in-chief, have published without criticism or revision.

Your Holiness knows too my publications, some translations from the Fathers, and some theological studies. I have submitted them all to Your Holiness and been presented with no criticism or correction, and they are still available for purchase in church bookshops.

As Your Holiness knows, a dispute arose concerning certain expressions used in reference to the Eucharist. I gave my opinion, based on the studies I have made, and when the matter was put before my fellow-professors at the Coptic Theological Seminary, they supported what I had said. This investigation took place at the request of Your Holiness and the professors communicated their conclusions to you.

It is clear that the clergy in London, because of their absence from the country, are unaware of all these details and were thus open to being led astray and issuing the statements they have made.

I beg Your Holiness's leave to add that I have tried by all means to arrange a meeting with you. The mediation of bishops, priests and leading laymen all known to Your Holiness has been to no avail. My wife wrote you a letter, in confidence of your paternal concern for us both, in which she tried to pave the way for a meeting, but it seems that Your Holiness's many other pre-occupations made it impossible to arrange. But if a meeting between the father of the church and one of her sons and his co-workers proved not to be feasible, should it then be said that judgment had been pronounced against him? When and how did that judgment take place? Can the justice of the church, which you guard with such care, accept this injustice? The canon law and the traditions of all the councils stipulate that judgment can only be passed after a fair investigation before a canonical body and in the presence of the accused person.

For all these reasons I truly and sincerely believe that the action taken by the clergy of the Coptic Orthodox Church in London constitutes a dangerous precedent, undermining the foundations of canon law and threatening justice in the church.

I repeat that it appears that the situation is unclear to them and that they do not have precise information concerning the details mentioned above. I am concerned, Your Holiness, that the fine reputation our church has traditionally held from earliest times will be marred in the eyes of those to whom these letters have been sent, for they know that the statements they contain are without foundation, and that the penalties mentioned in the letters are not the outcome of procedures stipulated by canon law, which guarantees justice and fairness within the church.

Your Holiness, I am confident that some force of circumstance has led to this deeply disturbing incident, and I pray God that He may intervene and relieve the church we love of these problems. I am confident too that Your Holiness will feel compelled to intervene to set these matters in order and put an end to the harm that will be caused as a result of the step taken by the clergy of the church in London, so that our church will remain a faithful witness to the truth of Christ and the principles of ecclesiastical discipline, and retain the image she has traditionally borne before the whole world.

As I leave Egypt I am full of hope that Your Holiness's prayers go with me and that I may enjoy your goodwill. I shall continue to bear witness to the truth for which my church and her doctrine stand, and hope my case will provide contemporary proof of the zealous concern of the fathers of the church for the rights of her sons within her institutions and for the faithful implementation of canon law and the administration of justice.

May Your Holiness be pleased to accept my earnest thanks, respect and esteem.

Your faithful son,

Deacon George Habib Bebawi.