

Final Reflections

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I was asked to offer some reflections on what has been said in this consultation. I apologize that I will probably not make mention of every paper that was presented because I was not asked to do this from the beginning and, therefore, I did not take notes on every paper.

Retrospectively, I realized that what I have experienced here was prophetically outlined by the main pillars of Coptic spirituality that Pope Tawadros II had outlined at the commencement of our conference.

1. Building relations of love in Christ.
2. Studying history, traditions, dogma and values.
3. Dialogue.
4. Prayer.

What are some of the things that stood out for me?

From the first night, we became acquainted with St. Mark and the early Christian foundations of African Christianity. This was a great message of anchoring roots and identities in the significant past that reaches far back into the times of the early church. A child usually wants to imitate a parent they admire and the life of St. Mark has been a great reminder of a heritage calling for imitation. The church can be and is in continuity the work and testimony of this great saint.

Looking back to early martyrdom, Archbishop Angaelos spoke about embracing death, which does not mean loving death, but not fearing it. He left us with a memorable line: “I can choose to give up my life but I will never accept that anyone else has to.”

George Makeen pulled us down to the ground. From the glorious narratives of St. Mark and an identity built around our heroic traditions, he warned the church to wake up, like an OT prophet. Wake up, Church! The narratives that gave us meaning are not working any more. We live in a world that feels the burden of producing meaning for their lives and that is throwing people into depression. They feel helpless before global destructions (the environment, the economy, wars, etc.). They cry for help while at the same time they feel too small to save it. The

church, holds a timeless message, but they have to dress it in contemporary clothing. A mother knows that the child has to eat vegetables, so they will cut them into cute little faces to make them more interesting and inviting. They won't speak to the child about how much potassium their organism needs per day. The truth, therefore, is not compromised when it changes dress, but it is carried forward into each generation.

Leslie Doll, showed us the daring church. A church that is not afraid to run to the aid of our church family members around the world, in dangerous zones and in horrific situations. She showed us the suffering church and possibilities of sharing in the pain of our brothers and sisters, mourning with those who mourn and sitting with them in their pain. She reminded us that in heaven we will show our scars, not our degrees or diplomas or any other achievement and this took me to the image of Jesus himself, who was able to show his own scars on his resurrected body. What carried over in his transformation was the scars in his hands and on his side. All people know you cannot take anything with you to the grave, but Jesus showed us that from this life you can actually take your scars with you, scars like trophies. A permanent testimony to what God is able to redeem and even use for His purposes.

Father Stephen Platt shed Christ's light on this darkness of suffering around the world. He showed us that there is no single space that Christ's light cannot shine, even in the hell of the concentration camps. This horrific darkness was nevertheless incapable of shutting out the light of St. Maria Skobtsova, an icon indeed. As an evangelical I would not hesitate to call her my icon as well. Her example, among others, and John Behr's words that Jesus disappears when his people become his body is a call for us to *be* his body, even if Jesus feels to have disappeared. Like St. Maria, do not expect to see Jesus and feel Jesus in order to serve him. Jesus is in the face of the other, regardless of who they are.

Sara showed the partnership that's necessary in spreading the light, as we also partner with Christ. She reminded us of Jesus entering into an equal partnership with the Samaritan woman in order to bring the light to her town. She also alerted us to pay attention on how we learn about the other. How do we learn about Nestorianism, for example? Are we given pre-made judgments and asked to leave it alone, or do we do justice to all humans, allowing them a voice? Human courts would allow even the worst murderer to give a defense for themselves, yet

we, righteous Christians, refuse to allow our brothers and sisters to give a defense of their faith before we pass judgment on whether they are part of the body of Christ too or not.

Jim reminded us that actually uniformity should not be valued as much as diversity. The parts of the body need to be different, otherwise they are useless. They do not serve the functions a body should have. He used Babel as a great image of a parallel sin we tend to repeat, not with language but with ecclesiastical differences. We refuse to scatter and develop freely into a beautiful diversity. We demand that all are identical and in the same place. And, he spoke for all of us, when upon closing his paper, he called the 21 martyrs as *our* martyrs. Simply Christian. Shockingly, he pointed out, that the killers see us the way *we* should see ourselves. As simply Christians, no other descriptor added.

What I really loved about Nathan's talk was something so obvious that we, however, never think about. The givenness of the other! Whether we like it or not, the other is here. He is our reality. He is our world. This is the truth.

It made me wonder whether I really do love the truth. Because loving the truth means you don't love fantasies or illusions. You love the reality before you, as it is. As with any relationship, it is problematic to love someone as you have created them in your mind. Knowing someone is a process of dismissing your wishes of how they are or your aspirations of how they should be and see the real, love the real before your eyes. Then you truly are a lover of truth. But if you wish the other to disappear, how different is that than committing murder in your heart? You just wished their extinction, their removal from the scene, their failure and fruitlessness and barrenness. You wished their death in your heart.

Finally, archbishop Angaelos exhorted us to carry our cross in a way that does not offend our faith, but with joy. Not in misery but as the joyful faces of the Coptic icons inspire us, these ideal symbols of our spiritual existence.

Suffering and joy are not incompatible, after all. One public figure in Greece said on TV after the economic crisis and the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean began: people who are not depressed in this day and age, must be psychopaths or they must be completely out of touch with reality.

But the joy we speak about is not the product of losing touch with reality. It's the response to having descended to the darkest depths of reality, the darkest depths of Hades as in a dark tunnel and having come out the other side, into the light. The job of the Christian is to take a fearless accurate inventory of suffering in its fullness. The truth and nothing but the truth. Not avoid it. But truth is not exhausted there for the Church has also taken an inventory of the inexplicable testimony of joy, worship, following, the empty tomb and the resulting powerlessness of death in the early church until today.

The reality that we were all watching on our screens with the 21 martyrs was indeed their horrific martyrdom, but we were also witnesses to their inexplicable peace, hope, even joy in Jesus Christ their savior. That is a reality, a fact, just as observable, tangible and measurable as the pain and injustice of our world is, even if it's inexplicable.

So, from this conference, I leave with joy, because I have seen it in the midst of suffering. I came to Egypt and I witnessed it. The suffering remains unchanged, persecution continues, but we leave knowing that joy *is* possible and available to us in our pain.

Till we meet again!