

STATEMENT FOR AUGUST 20, 2013 PRAYER SERVICE AT ST. VARTAN ARMENIAN CATHEDRAL

We come together today in prayer for our beloved homeland, and in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Egypt, who are engaged in a critical struggle for the country's future, but whose courage and innovation have inspired the world.

The Coptic Church has witnessed the violence of the last few days and, indeed, the attacks of the last several years, with profound sadness. We grieve for the martyrs and victims who have lost their lives; for the families and communities they left behind; for the vulnerable and defenseless who have done nothing to provoke the attacks which have claimed their loved ones and livelihoods; and for our beloved native country, which is a land defined by the generosity and goodness of its people.

This is regrettably not the first time we have gathered to console each other in the wake of a sectarian attack. What pains us further in this instance, however, is the misinformation which has brought us to this moment, and which continues to circulate in the media and many political leaders. As Egyptians who join in the struggle for Egypt's future, it is our responsibility to draw the attention of the world to the atrocities that have occurred by the supporters of the deposed president Morsi.

The Copts of Egypt who have been ruthlessly attacked in the last several days have done nothing but support their country through prayer and action. When 33 million people took to the streets on June 30 to champion democracy, we were among them, fighting for the future of the country we love because, like our Muslim brothers and sisters who likewise sought the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, we knew Egypt deserved better, and could be better. Following Dr. Morsi's removal, his supporters have engaged in a campaign of false propaganda intended to cause division and incite violence. The so-called protests this group staged for over forty-five days at various locations within

Cairo were far from peaceful, but included groups of armed criminals who tortured dissenters and were intent on reclaiming power at any cost. Their continuation posed a very real threat to the country's security.

In the days following the dispersal of these violent gatherings, terrorist forces purporting to protest in the name of democracy have attacked over 70 churches, burning many down entirely, on the claims that it is the Coptic community that was somehow responsible for the removal of Dr. Morsi. The leaders of these groups have not hidden their agenda with respect to the Copts. They have made public statements explicitly threatening Christians with bloodshed and urged their followers to attack Christians. Despite these coordinated assaults against Egypt's Christians, their homes and businesses, and the unprecedented destruction of houses of worship and other Christian schools and institutions, this sectarian violence has gone largely unreported in the Western world, and has inexplicably been disregarded by many political leaders in the West.

The reality of what is occurring in Egypt is a far cry from the image that has been portrayed in the United States. Those leaders cannot call for respect for universal rights and political reform while simultaneously ignoring the systematic attacks upon Egypt's Christian community. These principles are unachievable unless those individuals who seek to eradicate Egypt's Christians are brought to justice, and the root causes of this violent extremism addressed. Any ally of Egypt must recognize that those who would employ terrorist tactics and sectarian violence in an effort to intimidate and acquire power do not share the values of the civilized world and cannot be a partner for peace.

This wave of terrorism threatens not only the Coptic community, but the very foundation of our beloved homeland. Indeed, these attacks strike at the heart of Egypt, and should shake the collective conscience of any society that values basic human rights.

In February 2011, during the uprising that resulted in Mr. Mubarak's removal from power, President Obama stated: "All of us who are

privileged to serve in positions of political power do so at the will of our people.” Why is it different two years later? When the people of Egypt rose in revolt on June 30, they voiced their rejection of an authoritarian regime that sought to distort Egyptian culture and destroy any chance of democracy. As Mr. Obama said, they expressed their will. It was this collective will for change that united over 33 million people in the streets despite the very real risk of harm. Although there has been much political debate about whether or not this popular uprising was a coup, we know better. We know that it was an expression of the people’s will in a manner that only the heroic people of Egypt could achieve. We know also that this was not an action against democracy, but the very embodiment of democracy, taken to remove a leader who sought to dismantle any check on his authority and consolidate power in the hands of a select few who would sacrifice Egypt for their own interests.

Our sorrow over the events of the last several days has not replaced the hope we felt following the revolution of June 30. It is this hope that compels us to gather in prayer with our Muslim brothers and sisters who love Egypt as we do, and who seek to restore her to the safe and prosperous nation that has been, and will continue to be, an inspiration to the world. Our beloved father, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, encourages us in this hope, reminding us that the hand of God is stronger and mightier than any criminal or group that may persecute us, and that it is God’s hand that will protect and rebuild our churches and our country.

We may not be able to join our Egyptian brothers and sisters in the streets of Egypt as they strive for peace, but each of us must be our own ambassador for Egypt. We must pray without ceasing; we must alert our friends, family, colleagues and leaders to the reality of what is transpiring in Egypt; and we must embody the principles of generosity, tolerance and unity which characterize our beloved homeland and will restore it to safety and prosperity.

The innate goodness of the Egyptian people is perhaps most evident in times like these, in the wake of tragedy. Several days ago, I watched an

interview of an elderly man who, having just lost his own business at the hands of these violent extremists, rushed to the nearby church when he heard it was attacked to assist in cleaning and repair. When asked what moved him to come to the church in the midst of this crisis, he responded: "This is my home." This Egyptian spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice is unmatched. Together with our unshakeable faith in God, it is the source of our strength, and the guarantee of our future. Our faith is genuinely demonstrated by the faithful Copts who prayed in the ruins of their burned churches this past Sunday.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Egypt's brave leaders, its military and police, and in particular General El-Sissi, who responded to the will of the people and work tirelessly to guide our great nation through this critical time of transition, and were ready to sacrifice even their own lives for the greater good of our beloved Egypt. We thank also Egypt's loyal neighbors, who have expressed their solidarity with the people of Egypt, and have pledged their continuing support.

As His Holiness Pope Tawadros reminds us, whereas the hand of evil may approach to burn, kill and destroy, the hand of God is at all times closer, and will protect, strengthen and build.

May our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the King of Peace, comfort the families of the martyrs and victims, grant speedy recovery the wounded and the injured, open the eyes and hearts of those who persecute His church, give comfort and strength to His people, and continue to bless our beloved Egypt.

Glory be to God forever, Amen.