

Egyptian theologians look to early church after recent attacks

by [Albin Hillert](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

Only a few days after the December 12 attack against the city's Coptic Christians as they worshiped, theologians met near Cairo to seek unity in an early church father.

The academic conference Saint Irenaeus and Enlightened Humanity had been planned by the Anaphora Institute in collaboration with Lyon Catholic University in France.

"St. Irenaeus focused on the worldwide church as one body," said Egyptian bishop Anba Thomas of El-Qussia, founder of the Anaphora Institute. "And our vision at Anaphora has been to emphasize that there are no foreigners here, as in Christ, we are all one in his image. We want life to be a practical implementation of that dimension of the teachings of St. Irenaeus, where we see the church as that beautiful image of a tree possessing deep, strong roots and open branches."

Thierry Magnin and Marie-Hélène Robert from Lyon Catholic University stressed how Irenaeus came from the East and went to the West, creating a theology that integrates both.

"The theology of St. Irenaeus is in many ways a common ground between Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity," Magnin said.

John Behr from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, introducing the first session of the conference, stressed the many similarities between the theological context of St. Irenaeus and the present day.

"We should remember that Irenaeus' writings come from a pre-imperial Christian context, which in many ways is similar to the times we live in today," Behr said. "Our understanding of theology has since been fragmented, and it is sometimes difficult to see what holds us together. But I believe that our objective here in Egypt, in studying the teachings of Irenaeus, is a way to come together to move forward."

Bishop Thomas also saw the gathering as an opportunity to focus on Jesus' teaching to love one's enemies and resist the temptation to succumb to hatred after the

bombing of the Coptic cathedral in Cairo, which killed 25 people and injured 31 others. Militants from the so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility.

“Our hearts are bleeding, our tears are not stopping, but still we forgive, we carry our cross, in dignity and in peace,” Thomas said. “In St. Irenaeus, we can learn of the dignity of those who have left us in martyrdom.”

Bishop Anba Angaelos, who leads the Coptic Orthodox Church in the U.K., released a statement after the attacks, noting that Christians have faced persecution in various places throughout the past two millennia. Like Thomas, he called for forgiveness, but not at the price of neglecting justice.

“Forgiveness ensures that our own hearts are not entangled in a web of anger and resentment, or corrupted by feelings of hatred or revenge,” he said. “Forgiveness is ultimately liberating and empowering, but at the same time, justice is essential; not for the purposes of punishment, but to secure and protect our societies in which people must respectfully live side by side.”

He also urged the Egyptian government to do more to hold perpetrators accountable: “In recent decades, we have seen recurring acts of violence against Christians and Christian communities in Egypt. Time and time again, very few, if any, perpetrators have been brought to justice, and we subsequently continue to witness an escalation of these attacks.”

Ten percent of Egypt’s population is Christian. In August, Egypt passed a law with rules for church construction that are more restrictive than those for a mosque, the Associated Press reported.

Churches must apply to the governor of their province in order to build, according to the law, and the governor must consider “the preservation of security and public order” before approving any new building, AP reported. There have been riots and attacks when Christians have constructed without permits or worshiped in other buildings.

Nader Shukry, a Christian activist and researcher, told AP the threat of mob violence from the Salafi Muslim sect could influence decisions. “What if Salafis protest against the construction of a church, would this prompt the governor to turn down the request, for fear of national security?” he asked. —World Council of Churches; the *Christian Century* staff

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