



Fourth round of negotiations on developing cooperation between theological schools of the Russian Orthodox and Coptic Churches takes place in Russia



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On June 26-30, 2022, the fourth round of negotiations on the development of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church was held in Russia as part of the work of the Commission for Bilateral Dialogue.

On June 27, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and His Holiness Patriarch Tawadros II of the Coptic Church the plenary session took place at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy under the chairmanship of its rector, Bishop Siluan of Petergof, who is

responsible for coordinating this line of cooperation with the Coptic Church. The negotiations at the Academy located near the banks of the River Neva were timed to the three remarkable dates in the Russian history, namely, the 350th birth anniversary of the Emperor Peter the Great, the 280th anniversary of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, and the 75th anniversary of the revival of theological schools in the Russian northern capital.

Taking part in the negotiations on the part of the Moscow Patriarchate were Archpriest Valentin Vasechko, deputy chairman of the of the Russian Orthodox Church's Education Committee and the first vice-rector of the Ss Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Post-Graduate Studies; Archpriest Alexander Abramov, secretary of the Synodal Commission on Bioethics and senior lecturer, the Chair of church practical and general humanities subjects at the Sretenskaya Theological Academy, Moscow; Archpriest Vladimir Khulap, vice-rector for academic work, St. Petersburg Theological Academy (SPbTA); Archpriest Dimitry Yurevich, head of the Chair of Bible Studies, SPbTA; Archpriest Dimitry Sizonenko, head of the International Department, SPbTA; Rev. Pavel Lizgunov, vice-rector for academic work, Moscow Theological Academy, a member of the Working Group for Bilateral Theological Consultations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church; Rev. Vyacheslav Zavalny, research assistant at the St. Petersburg branch of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR); Ivan N. Sudosa, head of the St. Petersburg branch of the DECR and assistant professor of SPbTA; Sergei G. Alferov, a DECR staff member and a member of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church; Vladimir O. Borzenko, a staff member of the Synodal Department for Church's Relations with Society and Mass Media and assistant to the first vice-rector of the Russian Orthodox University of St. John the Theologian; Natalia G. Golovkina, deputy head of the Chair of Oriental Christian Philology and Oriental Churches, St. Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities.

The Coptic Church was represented by Bishop Michael, rector of the Coptic Theological Academy and Seminary and the first Patriarchal vicar of Cairo; Bishop Kyrillos, dean of the Ss Athanasius and Cyril Coptic seminary, vicar bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles (took part online); and Hieromonk Daud el-Anthony, representative of the Coptic Church in Russia.

The participants in the meeting considered the implementation process of agreements reached at the third round of negotiations held in Egypt in October 2021 and outlined steps to be taken to develop cooperation in the academic sphere till the end of 2023. Among the priority areas in the work are the resumption of the students and faculty exchange, organization of joint lecture series and academic conferences, including lectures in video format for wider public, as well as an access to library resources and meetings of the Russian and Coptic experts to discuss positions of the two Churches on the biggest challenges of modern society. The joint memorandum with concrete proposals was signed on the results of the meeting and will be submitted to the Primates of the Russian Orthodox and Coptic

Churches for approval,

Bishop Siluan gave the high guests a tour around the Academy. He showed them the Patriarchal chambers, lecture halls, classrooms, the church of St. John the Theologian, the Church Archeology Museum, and rare books and manuscripts in the languages of the peoples of the Christian Orient kept at the library's stock. The meeting being over, a grand reception was given to the participants on behalf of the SPbTA rector.

On June 28, Metropolitan Varsonofy of St. Petersburg and Ladoga warmly welcomed members of the Coptic Church delegation at the parish house of the church of the Smolensk icon of the Mother of God. He greeted representatives of Patriarch Tawadros II on behalf of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, saying: "Welcome to the blessed land of St. Petersburg! We always rejoice when the distinguished guests visit our Fatherland and our glorious city. We cherish our meetings with our brothers from the ancient Coptic Church, the Church of the great saints and wondrous zealots of the Christian faith. Again and again the Lord is bringing us together to glorify His name by doing useful and good deeds!"

Metropolitan Varsonofy shared his impressions of Patriarch Tawadros' visit to St. Petersburg in November of 2014, recalled his pilgrimage to the Christian shrines of Egypt and pointed out at the importance of the historical meeting of the Primate of the Coptic Church with Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, head of the Patriarchal

Bishop Michael warmly thanked the head of the St. Petersburg metropolia for hospitality, asked him to convey greetings and best wishes of Patriarch Tawadros II to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and expressed confidence in further strengthening of friendship and cooperation between the two Churches and the peoples of Russia and Egypt, saying: "It is a great privilege for us to come to the beloved Russian land and have the joy of being with our brothers. Every time we see your cheerful and kind faces, we feel our spiritual affinity which passes all bounds of nationality, language, and culture. These differences disappear in Christ, and we are as though carried to the time of the Apostles when the gracious power of the Holy Spirit was granting the first Christians the joy of meeting one another. This wonderful city is filled with this invisible and at the same time evident power, the city which had endured hardships but is preserving its beauty that transforms the world."

Metropolitan Varsonofy also greeted hieromonk Elkess Ava Mina who was present at the meeting. He has recently come from Egypt and was appointed assistant to the representative of the Coptic Church in Russia and charged with pastoral care of the Coptic community in St. Petersburg.

On June 29, the commemoration day of St. Theophan the Recluse, who used to be rector in his lifetime

and now is a heavenly patron of the St. Petersburg theological schools, the delegation of the Coptic Church attended the Divine Liturgy celebrated at the Academy's church of St. John the Theologian. The commemoration day traditionally marks the end of the academic year. Officiating at the divine service was Bishop Siluan of Petergof in concelebration with the ordained faculty members and students. After the service, Bishop Michael and hieromonk Daud attended the graduation ceremony as guests of honour and addressed the students with greetings and words of advice. Bishop Michael called the young people to be worthy successors of the labours of St. Theophan whom many Coptic faithful know as a translator of monastic rules of St. Pachomius the Great into Russian. Members of the Coptic delegation also met and talked with the Rev. George Mathew from the Malankara Church who is studying at the Academy.

The delegation of the Coptic Church stayed in St. Petersburg till June 30. The guests visited several religious, historical and cultural sights of the Russian northern capital, including the Laura of the Holy Trinity and St. Alexander Nevsky, the Resurrection Novodevichy Convent, the Cathedral of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God, St. Isaac's Cathedral, the Cathedral of Ss Peter and Paul and the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood. Also, the delegation went on the river and canal boat cruise. On board the ship, Bishop Michael, hieromonk Daud and hieromonk Elkess met with the students from the Coptic Church studying at the St. Petersburg higher educational institutions. The St. Petersburg Theological Academy was represented by the Rev. Vyacheslav Zavalny. He and the young people have agreed to maintain regular contacts in the future.

The fifth round of negotiations is to be held in Egypt in the autumn of 2023.