

Coptic world mourns death of Anba Epiphanius, Egyptian bishop and scholar

Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church said Epiphanius was "a true monk whose life was steeped in meekness and humbleness."

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



Anba Epiphanius of St. Macarius Monastery. Photo courtesy US-International Coptic Media Center.

Anba Epiphanius, a Coptic Orthodox bishop, scholar, and abbot of the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi el Natrun, Egypt, died July 29 at age 64.

A young monk confessed to murdering the abbot, and he was defrocked and expelled, Vatican News reported. He had previously been disciplined for misconduct. The motive is not yet known.

Anba Suriel of Melbourne, Australia, wrote in a tribute to his fellow Coptic bishop on social media: "He had a passion to see the Church develop in its theological education both in Egypt and abroad. What happened to him outside his cell is truly a tragedy of enormous proportions that will not only be remembered in his monastery but indeed throughout the Coptic community and beyond, as he was respected by many worldwide."

Before joining the monastery and becoming a priest, Anba Epiphanius trained as a medical doctor.

The Egyptian newspaper *Watani* noted that Epiphanius was "in charge of the monastery's huge reference and manuscript library which includes priceless material in various languages." The abbot had worked on translating several books of the Bible from Greek into Arabic.

Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church said in a statement that Anba Epiphanius was "a true monk whose life was steeped in meekness and humbleness; also a scholar who possessed a wealth of knowledge that fruited research and publications in various branches of ecclesiastical studies."

The Coptic pope sent officials to investigate alongside Egyptian authorities, according to news reports.

FOLLOWING UP (Updated September 26): Two monks were charged with the murder of Anba Epiphanius, an Egyptian theologian respected for his Arabic translations of early Christian sources written in ancient Greek and the pre-Islamic Coptic language. Many link the murder to opponents of Epiphanius's ecumenical efforts, reported Jacob Wirschafter and Mina Nader of Religion News Service.

In court filings September 3, Alexandria's public prosecutor alleged the monks murdered Epiphanius due to "ideological and financial disagreements."

Epiphanius was the point man in efforts by the Coptic pope, Tawadros II, to reconcile the Coptic Orthodox Church with the Vatican. The two popes, Roman and Coptic, had explored steps toward mutual recognition of baptism rituals and pilgrimage sites and even reconciling their liturgical calendars.

“Bishop Epiphanius posed a threat to the traditionalists after he used manuscripts from St. Macarius Monastery to prove that the Egyptian Church did not rebaptize Catholics until the 19th century,” said Bassem Al-Janoubie, a liberal Coptic activist.

Investigators obtained a confession from 34-year-old monk Wael Saad after another member of the order, Remon Ramsi Mansour, 33, attempted suicide.

“According to the monks, there were conflicts with the abbot,” said Amir Nassif, who resigned as Saad’s lawyer after the police confession was made public. “The devil controlled the monk.”

In late July, before Epiphanius’s murder, Saad was disciplined for improper use of social media. A group of the monk’s peers signed a petition opposing his removal.

In the immediate aftermath of the murder, Tawadros II ordered monks to deactivate all social media accounts, saying, “These behaviors are not true to monastic life.”

Four months before the murder, hard-line monks and others began to criticize Epiphanius after he told a Cairo conference on Middle East Christianity that the rebaptism requirement was a relic of competition between the Roman and Egyptian Orthodox churches when European Catholic missionaries arrived in the 1800s.

Many Copts reject the concept of unity and have broadcast their sentiments on the Facebook page of the Association of Faith Protectors, a group that emerged in opposition to Tawadros’s reforms.

“The so-called protectors began to establish online militias to attack, harass, and accuse the pope and his allies of heresy,” said Ayman Erian, a Coptic researcher in Cairo. “They are against the pope and fear the project of unity with other churches. . . . But I say that there is no one in our Holy Synod to compare to Epiphanius in terms of knowledge and piety. His passing is a great loss to the church.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “People: Anba Epiphanius.”