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**Pope Shenouda III
of Alexandria**

(1923-2012)

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The head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, Pope Shenouda III, the 117th Pope of Alexandria, died in Cairo on Saturday, 17 March 2012 after long illness. The death leaves a void at a time when the 10 million-strong Egyptian Copts, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, are facing increasing pressures and onslaught from the growing conservatism among the Egyptian Muslims. He ascended to the papacy on 14 November 1971 following the death of Cyril VI. For over four decades Pope Shenouda worked for peace between Christians and Muslims in Egypt and was respected all over the world for his leadership as well as scholarship.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has announced a state of mourning attended by the bishops of the Coptic Church from all over Egypt and abroad. The Egyptian government had announced a three day off work for Coptic Christians for mourning. Following official ceremonies in Cairo and as per his

wishes, his body was flown to the Wadi El Natrun desert monastery northwest of Cairo for burial later on Tuesday. He had spent several years of prayer, contemplation and abstinence in the remote Coptic monastery.

Tributes have come in from around the world, with Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI offering prayers and US President Barack Obama praising Pope Shenouda as an "advocate for tolerance and religious dialogue". The Egyptian military rulers paid tributes to the departed leader expressing hope that his wish of "preserving the unity of Egypt and the unity of its social fabric" would be achieved. The Grand Imam of the al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayeb expressed sorrow and said he "greatly remembers his vision towards Jerusalem and its history". Delegations from all over the world attended the funeral in Cairo.

Bishop Bakhomious, head of the church of Bahaira, a district in the Nile Delta north of Cairo, will temporally hold the post of pope for two months until a new leader is elected, which is based on a system of voting by board members of the church's city councils. The councils vote on three preferred candidates, and the final choice would be picked by a young child.

He was born on 3 August 1923 as Nazeer Gayed in Asyut district of Upper Egypt and became a monk in 1954 and assumed the name of Father Antonius the Syrian. During the presidency of Anwar Sadat, he was banished to Wadi el Natrun monastery in 1981 (where he was eventually buried on Tuesday) for criticizing the government's handling of an Islamic insurgency in the 1970s and for the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Because of its opposition to Israeli policies, the Pope also forbade Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He was released in 1985 by President Hosni Mubarak.

The successor of Shenouda will have a tough task of reassuring the Coptic community at a time when Egypt is going through political transformation with Islamist parties gain more political support and endorsement in popular elections. Since the overthrow of President Mubarak the country has witnessed renewed sectarian tensions between Muslims and Copts and many Coptic churches faced arson attacks. The Pope had a good relation with the Mubarak regime, which was essential for the protection the Coptic Christian community. This would not be easier for the successor of Pope Shenouda.

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