

In wake of Cairo attack, return to Christian roots inspires hope and forgiveness



The conference on "Saint Irenaeus and Enlightened Humanity" is hosted by the Anaphora Institute in collaboration with the University of Lyon, France. ©Albin Hillert/WCC

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*By Albin Hillert**

“What we did when we created the Anaphora Institute, is we dug deep into the ground, until we found water. We brought the water to the surface, spread it across the ground, and it bore fruit. The same you should do in yourself: dig deep until you find the love of Jesus, bring Christ to the surface, and it will bear fruit in your life.”

The words are by Coptic Bishop Anba Thomas of Qussia, founder of the Anaphora Institute near Cairo, Egypt. The quote is from 2010, but today as much as ever, digging deep for sources of life, hope and forgiveness seems key in search of peace and reconciliation.

Meeting but a few days after the 12 December attack against Coptic Christians worshipping at Saint Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo, where 25 were killed and many more injured, a conference has now gathered at the Anaphora Institute under the theme of “Saint Irenaeus and Enlightened Humanity”. Hosted by Anaphora in collaboration with the University of Lyon, scholars, students and theologians will explore St Irenaeus’ writings, and what the early founding fathers of the church can teach us as Christians in the 21st century.

Father 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," said Behr. "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."

The head of the Coptic Church, Pope Tawadros II, who was absent from the conference due to the recent events in Cairo, extended greetings via a video message. "As church, we always encourage research and studies of our common roots and our first history as Christians," Tawadros said. "We know St Irenaeus as an important figure in ecumenism between the West and the East, and it is my hope that this gathering can bring us closer."

Bishop Thomas reflected, "We have gathered for this conference in a very difficult moment, but our focus, our thoughts and efforts, are not on fighting people, but in finding hope in moving forward. We will share together in prayer. And our prayers are not only directed to the people of Egypt, but that we may all humble ourselves before the Lord, to pray for forgiveness together, for all the peoples."

"We stand firm, to say we do not fear. We are not afraid, but we will keep the principle that Jesus taught us. Jesus said to pray for those who persecute you, love your enemy, forgive, and do good to them."

"When we hear of such tragedy as happened last Sunday, it is very easy for us to feel hatred. But forgiveness is a sign of God. 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. We can all stand together in silence, to pray."

Dr Marie-Laure Chaieb from the Université Catholique de L'Ouest France, continued to reflect on the anthropology of St Irenaeus, stressing that "the life of a person, is the living vision of God."

"The glory of God is a living human person. A living person is an expression of the glory of God," affirmed rector Thierry Magnin from the Catholic University of Lyon. "Here at Anaphora, we see an example and an expression of this."

The Anaphora Institute is a retreat centre with a mission encircling five dimensions: to promote spiritual reflection; to bridge gaps between cultures and denominations; to offer education through participation and life experience; to reinforce local development, human rights and gender justice; and to create awareness of the need to live in harmony with all of creation.

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