The 21

A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Martin Mosebach

FOREWORD BY ARCHBISHOP ANGAELOS

"In this remarkable book, Mosebach doesn't simply avoid the standard Western narratives but turns the tables on them. He is not interested in providing a lurid account of barbarities from which we, in our secular sophistication, are immune, or in explaining away the miracles in the lives of the devout poor, or, still less, in telling us how to regard radical Islam, formulate a foreign policy for the Middle East, or help persecuted Christians abroad, much as they could use our help. Rather, he wants to show Christians – in the West and elsewhere – what these migrant workers from Egypt (and Ghana) can teach us about living our own faith."

—Commonweal *Magazine*

"Richly rewarding. . . . In a strikingly brief space, Mosebach has much to tell us about each of the martyrs as individuals and about their families. *The 21* is also deeply informative about the state of Coptic Egypt, and about martyrdom, and even about Coptic liturgy. The book's only flaw is that it is so emotionally moving that it is difficult to read without frequent breaks."

—*Christian Century*

"Mosebach is not interested in investigating ISIS. His purpose is to discover the power of the Coptic Church in the lives of its followers – a power he makes clear is not that of a death-embracing cult but that of a vibrant, joyful church. Indeed, reading this account gives the reader a glimpse of what it must have been like to be an early Christian during the persecutions in ancient Rome."

—*Catholic Herald*

"There is some good writing in the book, describing the forlorn landscapes of Egypt far from cities and tourist sites, and suggesting the impressive atmosphere of ancient accommodation between Muslims and Christians." —*Times Literary Supplement*

"The 21's strongest chapters take us deep into the lives and churches of these Coptic believers, with Mosebach exhibiting an attention to detail befitting his novelistic gifts. . . . We gain a rich impression of what shaped the lives and faith of these martyrs, and we witness how their martyrdom reverberates to this day through their families, churches, and communities." —*Christianity Today*

"Mosebach's account alternates between tragedy and triumph, between senseless deaths and staunch perseverance. . . . The book deals with topics – Coptic history, language, culture, and liturgy – of interest to Western readers."

—Middle East Quarterly

"Martin Mosebach is a superb journalist. Virtually nothing escapes his gaze, and he glosses over nothing." *—Die Welt*

"What's most striking perhaps about Mosebach's work is how it stands in such sharp contrast to our own vapid understandings of death, loss, and meaning in the secular West. Through the spiritually rich but physically impoverished lives of the Copts, we're offered a glimpse of our own society's much more profound destitution." *—Law & Liberty*

"Mosebach provides striking images of a singular Christianity unfamiliar to many Christians outside of the Middle East. . . . This will appeal to Christians as well as readers wanting to understand the lives of minorities in Muslim countries." *—Publishers Weekly*

"*The 21* is not for the faint of heart, particularly at the outset. But it is an important book, given that it describes the persecution of a group of Christians who are at the heart and root of the faith today. To turn away from this story would be to dishonor the twenty-one men." *—National Catholic Register*

"Mosebach has written a meditation on the profound sense of prayer he found in the Coptic Church, the depth of mystery in her liturgy, the valor of the witness of a minority that has been persecuted for 1,400 years, the reality of faith to be experienced in the poor and the powerless." *—Angelus News*

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Translated by Alta L. Price

PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

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Plough is the publishing house of the Bruderhof, an international community of families and singles seeking to follow Jesus together. Members of the Bruderhof are committed to a way of radical discipleship in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. Inspired by the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2 and 4), they renounce private property and share everything in common in a life of nonviolence, justice, and service to neighbors near and far. To learn more about the Bruderhof's faith, history, and daily life, see Bruderhof.com. (Views expressed by Plough authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Bruderhof.)

ISBN: 978-0-87486-299-7

Originally published under the title *Die 21: Eine Reise ins Land der Koptischen Martyrer.* Copyright © 2018 by Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Germany. English translation copyright © 2019 by Alta L. Price. The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut.

Printed in the United States of America

The Twenty-One Copts

Martyred on February 15, 2015

Tawadros Youssef Tawadros, born September 16, 1968, in El-Aour, Samalut

Magued Seliman Shehata, born August 24, 1973, in El-Aour, Samalut

Hany Abd el Messiah, born January 1, 1982, in El-Aour, Samalut

Ezzat Boushra Youssef, born August 14, 1982, in Dafash, Samalut

Malak (the elder) Farag Ibrahim, born January 1, 1984, in Al-Subi, Samalut

Samuel (the elder) Alham Wilson, born July 14, 1986, in El-Aour, Samalut

Malak (the younger) Ibrahim Seniut, born September 9, 1986, in El-Aour, Samalut

Luka Nagati Anis, born in January, 1987, in Mashat Manqatin, Samalut

Sameh Salah Farouk, born May 20, 1988, in Menqarios, Samalut

Milad Makin Zaky, born October 1, 1988, in El-Aour, Samalut

Issam Baddar Samir, born April 15, 1990, in El-Helmeya

Youssef Shoukry Younan, born June 2, 1990, in El-Aour, Samalut

Bishoy Stefanos Kamel, born September 4, 1990, in El-Aour, Samalut

Abanub Ayat Shahata, born July 22, 1991, in El-Aour, Samalut

Girgis (the elder) Samir Megally, born October 1, 1991, in Samsum, Samalut

Mina Fayez Aziz, born October 8, 1991, in El-Aour, Samalut

Kiryollos Boushra Fawzy, born November 11, 1991, in El-Aour, Samalut

Gaber Mounir Adly, born January 25, 1992, in Menbal, Matay

Samuel (the younger) Stefanos Kamel, born November 26, 1992, in El-Aour, Samalut

Girgis (the younger) Milad Seniut, born December 17, 1992, in El-Aour, Samalut

Matthew Ayariga, from Ghana

A note on names: Egyptians do not generally have last names as traditionally formulated in most Western countries. Instead, their name is composed of a given name followed by the given names of their father and grandfather. Egyptians known internationally often use their father's given name as a Western last name.

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Foreword

THE WORLD WILL NEVER FORGET the image of those twenty-one men dressed in distinctive orange jumpsuits, paraded by their captors along a beach in Libya. The video production of their brutal execution was broadcast to instill fear into the hearts and minds of millions, but it failed to omit the most crucial part of what is now recognized as the martyrdom of the Twenty-One: the faithful, peaceful, and resilient utterance of the Lord's name from their lips as they awaited imminent death. This declaration of faith has led to a revival of courage, and a confirmation of what it means to witness as a Christian, around the world. It has not merely transcended denominational lines throughout the Christian family, but has spoken to millions of people of all faiths (and none) who have been inspired by this active testimony.

The irony is certainly not lost when one looks at the seemingly powerful captors, wearing masks to protect their identities and digitally enhanced on screen to appear as if they towered over their "prey." While the Twenty-One knelt peacefully, unmasked and exposed for the world to see, their executioners were brutal in a way that crossed any acceptable line known to humanity.

This tragedy is reminiscent of Christ, who was laid bare on the cross at Golgotha, made a spectacle for all to see and

mock. Likewise, evil appeared to have triumphed as Jesus gave up His spirit on the cross; His resurrection was to take the world by surprise and give a gift that none other than God Himself could have presented through His willing sacrifice. The paradox of Christianity is most evident in the sacrifice on the cross and any martyrdom that follows it: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:54–55).

I am grateful for the faithful depiction presented by Martin Mosebach, whom I am now privileged to call a friend, of these brave and resilient men and their courageous families, who have done the inconceivable in forgiving those who murdered their loved ones. Their faithful witness can be directly connected to the heritage of martyrdom in their church, which has lived under persecution for most of the last two millennia. The Twenty-One stand in a long line of historic and contemporary martyrs of the Coptic Orthodox Church, whose members have been made strong, resilient, faithful, and forgiving through this persecution.

The 21 is a necessary work that will shed light on the contemporary meaning of martyrdom and what it truly entails to live out one's Christian faith regardless of the consequences. After all, the sacrifice presented by these simple workingmen by no means occurred in isolation, but is part of a global phenomenon of increased persecution of Christian women, men, and children, as well as of other religious communities.

The sacrifice of these Coptic Orthodox Christians from Upper Egypt and their companion from Ghana, working in Libya to support their families, is one that will resonate for generations to come. The martyrdom of the Twenty-One has touched and brought together the full breadth of

Christian expression around the world and continues to lead to fruitful, committed collaboration in order to prevent similar atrocities from occurring again in any community.

His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos
Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London
September 2019

Kiryollos

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The Head of Saint Kiryollos

THE PICTURE ON THE COVER of a magazine drew me in: it showed the head of a young man, evidently of Mediterranean origin, surrounded by a bit of orange-colored fabric. He was a lean youth with brownish skin, a sharp hairline, and a rather light mustache, his eyes half closed; his thin lips were slightly parted, offering a glimpse of his teeth. His expression wasn't exactly a smile – it was more one of deep relaxation, such that his mouth had involuntarily opened to take in a deep breath or let out a sigh.

Only later did I learn that the photo had been cropped, and that I had been misled. I hadn't initially gathered that this head had been severed from its body. In fact, there were no signs that this man had suffered any violence. If his face had tensed during the decapitation, or if pain or fear had made themselves visible, then any sign of these things had vanished the instant he died.

The image showed the moment immediately after the crime. It came from a video taken by his killers to document their deeds and spread terror worldwide. Strangely, though, separated from its broader context, it didn't inspire fear, at least not at first. This was not yet the head of a dead man. After the beheading, a flicker of consciousness and warmth had lingered a moment on his face – an eternal moment of dreaming and slumber, in which the finality of

what had just happened no longer seemed important. The cruel and sudden severing of this life had already created a new condition: all else receded into the past. And yet, at the moment captured in the picture, the sum total of his existence – about to recede for good but still present in his head – was somehow tangible one last time.

I have since learned his name: Kiryollos Boushra Fawzy, born November 11, 1991, in the Upper Egyptian village of El-Aour in the diocese of Samalut. His patron saint was Cyril of Alexandria, who at the fifth-century Council of Ephesus played a significant part in establishing the title of *Theotokos,* "Mother of God," for Jesus' mother. Unlike Cyril of Alexandria, though, Kiryollos did not play even a modest role in Egyptian public life when he was alive. He was one of far too many who cannot find work in their own country. That did not prevent him from becoming one of the saints of the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, just like his namesake. Only two weeks after the massacre, Tawadros II of Alexandria, Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, added Kiryollos's name to the *Synaxarium,* the liturgical list of Coptic martyrs; his image is now venerated on icons.

In the February 15, 2015, video showing his execution – and that of his twenty companions – I see him alive. He kneels in an upright position before his executioner. He looks relaxed; his curiously indifferent gaze seemingly directed at the beach in front of him, as though he wanted to take in every last detail. Since then I have also found a passport photo of him, likely from 2009. He was a soldier at the time, and his black felt beret features the insignia of the Egyptian Republic: an eagle centered on a black, white, and red flag. The image shows that he had a palsy – his left eyelid is drooped, partially obscuring his eye – although it clearly did not prevent him from passing the medical exam. In this picture, too, a sliver of his teeth can be seen, although his lips are closed.

Christianity's history is rife with beheadings. The severed head of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, is the subject of numerous paintings and mosaics, several of which have become widely appreciated works of art. John the Baptist was beheaded before Jesus was crucified, to satisfy the whim of an enraged queen. Then came Paul the Apostle, who, as a Roman citizen, was granted the privilege of requesting death by decapitation, thereby sparing himself the fate of being tortured to death – a punishment reserved for slaves. From then on, countless heads have rolled for maintaining their belief in Jesus Christ, even in predominantly Christian countries: consider the case of Sir Thomas More under King Henry VIII in England, or Alexander Schmorell, a member of the White Rose in Nazi Germany, who was later canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

And yet such figures feel far removed from us, as if they belong to some other, seemingly incomprehensible era. Much as the brutal nature of their deaths and the firmness, even stubbornness, with which they confessed their faith seem to match one another in context, we find their fate equally eerie. Hasn't the Western world, with its openness toward discussion and dialogue, long since overcome the need for opposites to be regarded as life-threatening? We live in an era of strict religious privatization, and want to see it subjected to secular law. Society seems to have reached a consensus on the rejection of proselytizing and religious zeal. Hasn't all that put an end to the merciless, all-or-nothing alternatives of believe or leave; or worse, renounce your faith or die?

But the photo of Kiryollos's severed head, and the video showing his companions' severed heads, are only a few years old. What does this apparent anachronism mean? Should we read it as a sign that our idea of historical progress was mere delusion? That martyrdom and Christianity

go hand in hand through every historical era, and that as long as there are Christians there will also be martyrs?

The head on the cover of the magazine would not let me go. Many readers were outraged, as an editor who had also been disturbed told me when I asked about it. But I wanted to keep it with me – I saved the clipping, and frequently contemplated it at length.

Kiryollos was the first of the fallen to step forward out of anonymity for me. The twenty-one men beheaded on the beach near the port town of Sirte, Libya, are always regarded as a group, just like the young martyrs of the Theban Legion, who were also from Egypt. Only one of the group was not a Copt, and came, as has since been learned, from Ghana, in West Africa. But because the Copts have considered him one of their own since his death, I, too, choose to refer to them here as the "Twenty-One."

The Coptic community and its Christian traditions, which have been faithfully preserved since the early apostolic age, are not well known in the West. The Roman Catholic Church has long cultivated a certain arrogance with regard to Eastern Christians, who are not in communion with Rome, and that fact prevents many, especially Catholics, from looking eastward. Not long after the Twenty-One were beheaded, I met with a German cardinal. I asked him why the Catholic Church did not formally recognize the testimony of these men of faith, as the old church generally had in cases of martyrdom. "But they're Copts!" he answered. I will not mention this high church dignitary by name, because I do not believe his helpless words should be heard as an expression of his own personal views. Wasn't he simply saying precisely what many of his peers would have, if given the chance? Right then and there I decided that I had to learn more about the Copts, and the Twenty-One in particular.

How might I get closer to them and find out more about their lives, their origins, and the circumstances in which they grew up? There are so many historic martyrs we know so little about, other than a few inaccurate details of their deaths; the dry lists of the *Martyrologium Romanum,* the Catholic Church's official register of saints, remained abstract until Christian art turned them into tangible, relatable images. Things are rather different with the Twenty-One: not only is there a video of their Passion, but this video has the selfsame intention and effect as a work of art, albeit a particularly vile one – it is at once both document and aesthetically staged, pathetic concoction. Stretching our definition of "art" to such a degree may seem inappropriate, but mustn't we admit that the video is effective, carefully choreographed, and designed with an attentive eye for color? Aren't there other realms where the border between art and reality has become dangerously blurred? For many, the increasing surrealness of the world has aroused a hunger for absolute authenticity. And isn't it an enhancement to the spectacle when the blood bathing the stage is real?

The Twenty-One could well have echoed the words of Paul the Apostle: "For we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men." But before they became such a spectacle for God and the world, each led the unremarkable life of a poor farmer. Seen in retrospect, this could be considered nothing more than apt preparation for their martyrdom. So was there anything in their villages that might have foreshadowed all this? In February and March of 2017, two years after the massacre, I traveled to Upper Egypt, to the homes they had left when they set out for Libya in search of work.