

## **The Martyrdom Month Celebrating The Coptic Church's Martyrs**

### **The 21 Martyrs of Libya**

The 21 Martyrs of Libya stand as one of the most vivid testimonies of the Coptic Church faith in modern times. The 20 Coptic Egyptians were simple laborers in Libya to provide for their families back home. The twenty-first was Matthew Ayariga, a Ghanaian Christian who was taken in a separate raid and inspired by the steadfastness of the Copts, declared, "Their God is my God." Together, they formed the blessed company now venerated as the 21 Martyrs of Libya.

Kidnapped by ISIS between December 2014 and January 2015, the men endured captivity for weeks leading up to their public execution on 15 February 2015 near Sirte, Libya. At the start, the men were treated fairly well with the goal of being persuaded to convert to Islam. Witnesses testify that when these attempts failed, the captors resorted to cruelty and humiliation that instead purified their faith. Like the Three Holy Youth in Babylon, who sang amidst the flames ([Daniel 3: 21-25](#)), these men sang and prayed in chains, awaiting their crown.

When all else failed, the men were taken to Sirte, which is on the coast of the Mediterranean, to be executed on live television. Airing on TV on February 15th, 2015, ISIS executed the 21 one by one. They used this method to see if they could try to shake the faith of the men one more time. Once again, the faith of the 21 martyrs was not shaken. They would all be beheaded on live television.

Finally, they were led to the Mediterranean shore, clothed in orange garments, and executed on video for the world to see. As each was forced to kneel, their lips moved with the prayer, "Ya Rabbi Yasou" ("My Lord Jesus"), echoing the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, who prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" ([Acts 7:59](#)). Their martyrdom was not hidden in some distant desert, but broadcast across the globe, making their witness a proclamation of the Gospel to all nations.

Now, when we recount their martyrdom and commemorate it in our Synaxarion, it feels different than other martyrs. That's because they are martyrs that were televised to the world. Their deaths weren't just written down, they were recorded and shown to the world. Their families are still with us to share their stories. These 21 martyrs are representative of the strength that faith has, even extending to their families, who were comforted and proud that their loved ones did not falter in their faith in Christ. Dionysius of Alexandria tells us that these martyrs "who were once with us, are now seated with Christ. They are sharers in His kingdom and partakers with Him in His judgment. They act as His judicial assessors." These words, among many others in comforting those who face martyrdom, also comfort the families whose loved ones stay steadfast in their faith until death.

May these 21 Martyrs of Libya be for us a modern example of what it means to live, and die, in Christ. May their prayers strengthen us to remain steadfast in faith, that we too may confess Christ boldly in a world that often denies Him.

#### **Sources:**

- Bible, ESV & NKJV
- The 21, A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs, Martin Mosebach
- Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Los Angeles
- Synaxarion of the Coptic Orthodox Church, 8 *Amshir* (Feb. 15/16)
- Dionysius of Alexandria, *Church History*, Eusebius, Book 7