

The Australian

Thousands mourn Egypt's Coptic Pope Shenuda III in Cairo

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Weeping Coptic Christians gather to pay their respects to Pope Shenouda III, during the viewing of the patriarch's body at the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo, Egypt, after he died aged 88 following 40 years in the role.

Source: AP

THOUSANDS of grieving Coptic Christians have packed St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo to bid farewell to Pope Shenuda III, his body on a wooden throne, as the church considered a new head for the anxious community.

Shenuda died on Saturday aged 88 after a long illness, setting in motion the process to elect a new patriarch for the Middle East's largest Christian community.

He led the Copts, estimated at 10 percent of Egypt's population of more than 80 million, for a whole generation, during which the country was hit by a wave of Islamist militancy from which he sought to protect his flock.

Tens of thousands of mourners converged on the cathedral in a queue that stretched for more than a kilometre, as military vehicles lined the road outside.

Church sources reported three people crushed to death as crowds pressed to see the body of the late religious leader, but no further information was available.

State television urged mourners to avoid crowding, saying they had until Tuesday to pay their respects.

Shenuda's body, dressed in formal robes with a golden crown on his head and a gold-knobbed staff cradled on his shoulder, was placed upright on the tall ornate papal throne where it will remain sitting in state until the funeral on

Tuesday.

Thousands of worshippers in black hoping for a final blessing from their spiritual leader took pictures of Shenuda on their phones, amid tears and wailing.

"It's a great loss for Egypt," Tourism Minister Munir Fakhry Abdelnur, a Copt and a close friend of Shenuda, told AFP.

"He was wise and was widely listened to. He will be missed at a time when we need wisdom and a patriotic spirit."

Copts nationwide mourned Shenuda, and one distraught woman in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia was critical in hospital after trying to commit suicide, the official MENA news agency reported.

It also said the head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, visited the cathedral to pay his last respects.

Based on wishes stated in his will, Shenuda will be buried at St Bishoy monastery of Wadi Natrun in the Nile Delta, where he spent time in exile after a dispute with the late president Anwar Sadat, state media reported.

Bishop Pachomious of the Nile Delta province of Beheira has assumed papal duties for two months until a council of senior clergy meets to choose a new pope, state television said.

The successor would be chosen according to procedures laid out in 1957 church bylaws.

Coptic bishops from around the world have already started to fly in for meetings on the funeral arrangements and succession.

"Egypt Weeps," read the headline of the state-owned daily Al-Akhbar as others bade "Farewell, Pope Shenuda."

"Egypt has lost one of its greatest men," said the Al-Azhar institution in Cairo, Sunni Islam's most prestigious, in a statement. "He is a great loss, a dear friend."

Cairo-based Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi described Shenuda in a statement as "an Egyptian and national personage who took upon himself responsibilities for Egyptians and all Arabs."

Shenuda had suffered health problems for years, frequently travelling to the United States for medical care.

Condolences flooded in from around the world, with US President Barack Obama hailing Shenuda as an advocate for tolerance and religious dialogue.

Pope Benedict XVI had offered prayers for Shenuda, the Vatican said.

"I can say how much the entire Catholic Church shares the suffering of the Orthodox Copts," Benedict said in a statement released by the Vatican.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation chief Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu called Shenuda's death "a great loss not only to the Coptic Christian community, but for the world at large."

Muslim leaders in Egypt were quick to express their condolences.

Shenuda's death is "a grave calamity that has afflicted all Egypt and its noble people, Muslims averse to the assassinated Sadat for his outspoken criticism of the late leader's courting of Islamists.

But he supported Sadat's successor, Mubarak, who was overthrown by a popular revolt more than a year ago which led to an Islamist-dominated parliament -- the first in Egypt's history.