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“21 Martyrs of Libya”: Presenting Holiness in the Contemporary Coptic Church

In the Coptic tradition, recognition of someone's holiness is a rather spontaneous process and the Holy Synod of the Church rarely announces new saints. Nevertheless, a new trend has become evident. In 2013 the Church officially canonized Patriarch Cyril VI of Alexandria (1902-1971) and Archdeacon Habib Gerges (1876-1951), and in February 2015, the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, Tawadros II, canonized twenty-one Coptic Christians, a week after the medias of so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) uploaded a video onto social media showing their beheading. The video on social media depicting their vivid and horrid staged execution, inspired the iconographic presentations of the event. Following the newly established, diverse and ever-growing iconographical and hagiographical tradition around the newly recognized martyrs of the Church, this paper will examine how holiness is visually constructed in the Coptic Church, in light of the legacy of late professor Isaac Fanous (1919-2007), who established the canons of the Neo-Coptic School of Iconography.