

## Egypt church issues first conversion certificate

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Fr. Matthias Nasr Manqarious and Maher Al-Gawhari

CAIRO (AFP) &mdash; Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church has for the first time issued a certificate of conversion to a Muslim-born Christian, his lawyer said, in a country where religious conversion is highly sensitive.

Maher al-Gohari, who is seeking to change his religion on his official documents from Muslim to Christian was asked by a court to provide a conversion certificate from the Egyptian church.

"He handed it in today," Nabil Gabriel told AFP. "It is the first time the church provides this sort of certificate."

In Egypt, citizens are required to carry their personal ID cards at all times. Without an ID card, one has no access to basic services.

It is only the second time that such a request has been formally made in a country where converting to Christianity, while not illegal, is practically impossible.

Last year, a court rejected a request by a Christian convert from Islam, Mohammed Higazi, to have his new religion written on his identity card.

Highlighting the sensitivity of the topic, the church would not comment on Gohari's case specifically.

"In general, the church cannot turn away anyone who reaches out to it, otherwise it would be abandoning one its role as a church."

Tensions often run high between Egypt's Muslim and Christian communities in an increasingly religious society dominated by Sunni Muslims.

Egypt's Copts -- the largest Christian community in the Middle East -- account for an estimated six to 10 percent of the country's 80 million inhabitants.