

## THE SUFFERING AND HOPE OF A TERRORIZED COMMUNITY

Again and again and for over six months now, the electricity and the telephone lines have been regularly interrupted, there is a lack of water and for over ten weeks Aleppo had been under siege and cut off from the rest of the world. The 17<sup>th</sup> of April, on Holy Thursday, the city was the scene of terrible attacks and people, horrified by the bombings, were unable to leave their homes to go to church. We cannot begin in these tragic circumstances to enumerate the sufferings and difficulties which the people of Aleppo have had to endure: humanitarian problems, material and social difficulties which they must face every morning with each sunrise. Aleppo is not alone to suffer in this country, where Saint Paul on his road to Damascus, turned to become the elected One of Jesus and the tireless defender of the church.

Everybody talk about the war in Syria which has been going on for more than three and a half years now, we hear about the strategic consequences, the geopolitical influences in that region, the violence, the affronts endured by the innocent population of a country which is pulled apart mercilessly. Though I do not underestimate the political stakes of what is going on in our country, in the following lines I would like to draw attention to the fate of Christians who are caught in this turbulence and the issues of this war and its consequences for the future of Christians in this region. For the Church, what is most important is that peace may be restored as soon as possible and with that peace we hope to see established a non-confessional and pluralistic democracy, guaranteeing to all Syrians a space of religious freedom which all the minorities composing this country need in order to live serenely and be full-fledged citizens in a country where they were born and where their ancestors are buried.

### *A GREAT MARTYR'S MOTHER*

I have been frankly in admiration, when I heard this fantastic American martyr's Mother saying to the journalists: "We have never been so proud of our son, he gave up his life while trying to unveil to the world the sufferings of the Syrian people". Diana Folley the mother of

James said these wonderful words, one month ago, on Wednesday the twentieth of August, just a few days after the salvage murder of her beloved son.(translated from French. AFP)

This declaration is a very significant witness to the truth, in these awful times in which the public opinion is in pray of an invasion of disinformation and dreadful lies. How the world would be different if the truth is respected, and the media wisely monitored.

Truth, we need it, more than anything else, in these terrible times! Everything and many capital issues seem to be manipulated in an unacceptable way, and the global human atmosphere becomes more and more polluted every day by an assault of wild media. This dreadful phenomenon reminds us the Tour of Babel: everybody speaks his own language, nobody understands nobody and the world seems confused and disoriented. The ephemeral building of human pried, the huge Tour they had constructed, collapsed with all their selfish ambitions. What is going on in the suffering Middle-East in these sad days, has much to do with the overflow of today's Media. Hundreds of television channels and newspapers have been mobilized and several news agencies has organized a propaganda campaign to divert and mislead the public opinion. The most disappointing of all what is happening is that a number of NGOs meant to monitor facts and provide the Media with exact news and informations has been unfaithful to their duties. We noticed this defect in the behavior of what is supposed the to be a "Human Rights Watch", eventually established, for that precise purpose, by the Syrian Opposition, a few years ago in London.

I would say more than that, the world could be much better and more human if eminent scholars and people of good will find places on decision makers sittings. It will be certainly very helpful if they are allowed to share in the political planning assemblies. Humanity needs now a day: truth and justice more than anything else.

### *HORRIBLE ACTS IN THE NAME OF GOD*

By the way and on the same distressing argument, it was just a few weeks ago, the day of sorrow in Mossul, the city in Irak wich witnessed the departure of all the Christians belonging to its long history and peaceful life for thousands of years! At the same time we had very bad news coming from Rakka, a city in Syria, where a large number of people has been murdered for religious reasons by a group of Jihady muslems actually ruling with the Coran laws this area, close to the Euphratus river. We had a lively parish of over one thousand

people in this city . The hurtful actions toward the Christians in Syria are innumerable in the country since the contestation movement turned to radicalization and violence.

On September 14<sup>th</sup> of this year, has been published in the city of Rakka, a statement of ISIS ( Islamic State in Irak an Syria) declaring that now on, has begun the Era of ISIS under the caliphate of Abou Bakr Al-KORCHI prince of the muslims. A number of laws and regulations has been decreed. Among these laws we can see: - the interdiction to deal with wines tobacco etc. / - the interdiction of any meeting or gathering of groups of people. / - No place for pluralism or diversity because God wants cohesion and unity among his people. / - All no muslim shrines, sanctuaries, monuments or statues has to be destroyed. / - The woman must cover herself with large coats and stay at home. / - Finally the statement makes this conclusion: we say to all of you: “you have already experienced the secular republic and suffered, now you are in times of the Islamic State and you will see with it all the difference.”

You have certainly heard about the execution of Father Frans VAN DER LUGT sj, on the sixth of april of this year in the old city of Homs, where he had chosen to stay despite the dangers, among a small group of Christians remained in midst of the muslims, under the domination of rebels army, where he has been for more than two years, helpful and friendly with everybody without any discrimination. He has always been, for over 40 years, a brilliant actor of the interfaith dialogue in Syria which he promoted among young people, and had become a symbol of Christian-Muslim friendship.

This death is indeed a great misfortune striking us in Syria, but it is neither the first nor the only one! When we consider Christians, we can speak without exaggeration of several hundreds of dead, many of whom were martyrs or innocent victims. We know of at least 10 priests assassinated, without speaking of the three martyrs, confessors of the faith, in the village of Ma'aloula last April. This community, refuge of Christians since the time of the roman persecutions, was attacked by Jihadists who vandalized churches and convents and kidnapped twelve Sisters to terrorize the population even more. We do not have precise statistics about the wreckage done to churches and convents throughout the country. These are heart-rending images that are shown us, unimaginable in this XXIst century and that you only see in films of terror and movies perhaps. Should we forget the bishops and priests who have been kidnapped two years ago and of whom we have no news? All of this is terrible and we do not know what to tell our faithful who are in great distress.

To all of these tragedies are added the indescribable suffering of hundreds of thousands of families in mourning, millions of refugees and all those who have stayed in their homes and labour night and day to find food for their children. All we are doing to help them remains precarious and very little in the face of what they really need in order to live with dignity. This inhuman war, with its barbarian scorched earth strategy, leaves nothing in its wake. Thousands of factories have been laid waste; goods have been stolen and sent out of the country; the contents of grain silos have been sent to Turkey as well as huge quantities of oil, stolen in the North of the country. Thousands of schools have been destroyed, tens of hospitals demolished and hundreds of dispensaries and medical centers all the same. It is catastrophic, a rampant tragedy that is annihilating this country, a country that was one of the most open to pluralism in this region and in which were reduced to utter misery millions of innocent human beings.

Whether we recognize it or not, Christians are presently living through painful days. They are disorientated by the explosion of a situation which in the recent past was rather quiet and safe. They lived peacefully in a society with a Muslim majority which was tolerant and even benevolent. There was a cordial living-together which gave many of them hope for a future ever more serene, bathed in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and friendship. Today, it seems that everything has changed dramatically. The protest movement which began peacefully was rapidly transformed into an armed revolt which spread terror and insecurity everywhere in the country. People are afraid to leave their houses, they avoid going out of their cities or villages, or do so only to move to other regions where they hope to find a safe refuge. In the perilous zones like Aleppo and the villages close to Turkey, what terrorizes the population more than the fighting and the bombing, are the kidnappings, the snipers, car-bombs, the shelling and the looting which numerous armed gangs inflict upon the civil population in areas where the army is not present.

#### *SYRIA IS THE PREY OF A DEVASTATING INVASION*

This being said, it is evident that some plot has been set up to destroy and dismantle the country. At the beginning of these events, we did not want to believe this but now we have more and more evidence that this is not a protest movement of the population but in reality a war of destruction led by a certain number of nations who, using the unrest of certain parts of the Syrian society, have implicated the population in a fratricide war into which they have injected arms, money and tens of thousands of fighters, Jihadists (Quaida),

fundamentalists, foreigners and mercenaries, recruited in many different countries. Everybody recognize, now a day, that thousands of European terrorists have joined the troops. Some people speak of a war between great nations or a world war three, taking place on Syrian soil for strategic advantages; but it is not the place to develop this here.

Nevertheless, we must never accept to join a nominated former ambassador of USA to the UN, Mr. Andrew Young, when he says: "Politics do not control the world, money does". We would rather look for a liberated, strong and meaningful politic, concerned first of all, by the dignity and wellbeing of human society. This proved to be the teaching of the Church, and the sayings of the Popes, all along the last century and this has been the message of our beloved Pastor the Pope Francis, since he set on the Chair of St Peter in Rome one Year ago. His Holiness stressed clearly in his first Message in the World Day of Peace on January first of this year:

*"The necessary realism proper to politics and economy cannot be reduced to mere technical know-how bereft of ideals and unconcerned with the transcendent dimension of man. When this openness to God is lacking, every human activity is impoverished and persons are reduced to objects that can be exploited. Only when politics and the economy are open to moving within the wide space ensured by the One who loves each man and each woman, will they achieve an ordering based on a genuine spirit of fraternal charity and become effective instruments of integral human development and peace."*

On the other hand what is happening in our country, seems some time like if it was a bargain between some muslim states and the western countries at the expenses of the Christians and others minorities in Syria and in the whole region. Some people would say that the Middle-East had been sold by the West, in exchange of billions of dollars and plenty of economical advantages and huge amounts of financial investments to the promoters of an expected teocratic and totalitarian Islamic State. This state would be fully run by the Charia, (the muslim law), where you wouldn't find any place for the minorities in the citizenship. The Christians of course in such a situation would be considered as zimmi without any civil right, with the conditions of slaves or foreigners, just tolerated and submitted to arbitrary rules and dues.

What I can give as tangible elements which make us doubt the good intentions of this protest movement are:

- repeated massacres, savagely perpetrated against peaceful populations in isolated areas of the country. The latest of which is Mossul's tragedy and the attack against Maan, a small village situated north of the city of Hama in Syria, where 42 christians, women, children and old people were murdered;

- kidnapping of Bishops, priests and religious in their own convents

- refusal to engage in dialogue or in any peaceful resolution to the conflict

- finally, the massive destruction of infrastructures and the annihilation of all that made this country live and progress. As an example, we can point to the ravages inflicted on Aleppo, the main economic center of this country.

I do not know whether or not Aleppo has yet been designated as a "disaster zone" by international powers. But what I do know is that it is truly a disaster zone: a human disaster zone, a material and economic disaster zone. The citizens of this great and beautiful city, with its seven thousand years of history and enlightened human culture, find themselves after more than three years and a half of senseless war in a desperate situation. The prosperity which Aleppo enjoyed and which placed her among the most important cities of this region has lost its aura. The innumerable attacks which have destroyed its factories and its flourishing industry, its infrastructure and social and administrative institutions, its commercial area and its legendary « souks », its ancient homes, its schools, and its hospitals have reduced the city to misery and its population to extreme poverty. Through the destruction of this city, Syria has lost one of its main sources of economic growth and social improvement. We can add the countless frustrations which the people of Aleppo have had to face lately because of the siege, without precedent, which the rebels have imposed upon the city last summer for almost two months. The lack of supplies has created penury of food and other products of first necessity...In a word, our population has suffered and been the innocent target of a war that is unjust and devastating. Aleppo was not alone to suffer, many other cities in the country has been the target of a similar dreadful disaster.

We cannot see anywhere, in all of these events, the evidence of a revolution or a search for betterment and the improving of the life of the citizens of this country. Rather, we ask ourselves every day increasingly, if this revolution is really a movement of Syrian citizens looking for freedom and democracy and a better life, or is it not a devastating invasion of our land, more terrible than the invasion of the Huns in the 5th century and the Tartars in the

Middle-Ages. This pretense of a revolution for liberty and betterment does not care about the life of the people it purports to serve, nor about the security of its inhabitants, nor about their subsistence nor the future of their children.

On our side bishops and in spite of all, we have done everything possible to ensure that our schools, the hope for the future, continue their education and cultural mission. E.G. there are 7 seven schools at present in my diocese, three of these schools are professional institutes training students for tourism, nursing and management. Another one for the building skills, has to start next October in order to prepare our youth to find some work in the expected reconstruction after this devastating war. We have been at the same time very close to our people, providing all kinds of material help they may need in their unexpected dramatic poverty. We offer them: Food and provisions baskets every month, health care and medication, scholarship subventions, housing assistance for those who lost their homes and a small salary for the families without any income due to the inactivity of the parents who have no more any employment in the destroyed city.

#### *THE HARD CHOICE OF CHRISTIANS*

After all what we have seen, we believe that there and in this spot that lies the core of the problem which torments Christians and their pastors in Syria, and If some opponents are wondering how it is that religious leaders and bishops are not the first ones to support the rebels, who, apparently, are fighting for freedom and democracy for their country? We need no more arguments to respond, the facts are evident and we have convictions that allow us to say that this uprising has nothing to do with freedom and democracy. If this were the case, it is undeniable that the Church would have been the first to become an ally of the unrest and the leader of those asking for substantial reforms in political governance and in the administration of public goods, beginning with the suppression of dictatorship followed by a democratic passage of power.

What Christians want for the short term and for the future, is to arrive at a non-confessional and pluralistic political system enabling each citizen, whatever his religious beliefs, to live in peace in his country and to participate in public life, with all the duties and rights which real citizenship requires.

## *OUR PASTORS, INSTRUMENTS OF INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE*

On this matter the Holy Father Pope Francis, concluded his memorable letter of September 2013 to President Vladimir Putin, reminding everybody that the thoughts of a spiritual leader could be of significant help to the decision makers. Economy will only develop if it allows a dignified way of life for all human beings, from the eldest to the unborn child, not just for citizens of the G20 member states but for every inhabitant of the earth, even those in extreme social situations or in the remotest places saying: *“Mr. President, in the hope that these thoughts may be valid spiritual contribution to your meeting, I pray for the successful outcome of the G20’s work on this occasion”*.

In his speech on the opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the Patriarchs and Catholic Bishops of the Middle-East on December 3, 2012, his Beatitude Patriarch Mar Bechara Rai, speaking of social interaction in the M-E. said: “far from political considerations and in order to distinguish between religion and the state, Christians, Jews and Muslims are invited to rediscover the will of God in union and in harmony within the human family; they are invited to consider the believer of another faith as a brother worthy of respect and love...In the frame work of this union, it is the right and the duty of Christians in the country, to enjoy full citizenship.” He added that this implies, on one hand, that believers have a deep faith which inspires them for the common good, for peace, fraternity and justice; and on the other hand, it supposes that the national community has a “positive secularism” which frees religion from the domination of politics and enhances the community with the contribution proper to religions. All of this is in keeping with a recent Apostolic Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Church in the Middle- East.

For us, the disciples of Jesus-Christ in Syria, witnesses of the birth of the Church at the time of the Apostles, this « momentum » of our two-thousand year- old history, which we are now living, remains dramatic. It could, God forbid, deal a fatal blow to our presence and to our apostolic mission in our countries in these times of great change! The misfortunes which are upon us relentlessly have inflicted great suffering and are enough to discourage a great number of people. If the war continues and if peace is not restored in the streets and in our hearts, all our hopes may be lost, for the misery **to all Syrians, Christians and Muslims alike.**

-NAHAR newspaper published, on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2002, on that purpose an important declaration issued by his highness prince TALAL BIN ABDUL AZIZ AL SAOUD and it states:

“The Arab world is exposed to a human, social, cultural, political and economic exhaustion which shows a critical aspect: The immigration of Christians that has not stopped for many years.

It is a harsh reality which will result in long term effects in the future of our Arab world. If the Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, do not take a decision to face and stop this phenomena.

As in times of world crisis, such as ones the world flows through generally and especially the Arab world today, there must be a pause to review the reasons for this fatal immigration of the Arab multiculturalism.

The Arab Christians formed one of the pillars of both old and modern Arab construction...

...Their survival, last but not least, is to prevent draining an important section of the creative scientific, cultural and intellectual potential of the Arab world. They are also keen elements of economic power in trade, industry, finance, professional specialization and workmanship.

In short, if the immigration of Arab Christians continues, it will be a deep blow pointed to the core of our future. Our urgent task is to prevent this immigration by consolidating the survival of this category in our east and looking forward to the opposite immigration if possible.”

### *GENEVA A RAY OF HOPE*

Since the beginning of this senseless war, the Church, all the while encouraging the regime to establish the reforms desired by the majority of citizens, has called for an end to armed conflict, has called for dialogue in order to come to a concerted political solution to this crisis that has plunged this country in blood and fire. The Patriarchs of the Middle-East as well as the General Assembly of the Bishops of these Middle-Eastern countries, together with the Holy See and most particularly His Holiness Pope Francis, have not ceased to call the believers to prayer, the fighters to calm and the nations to military non-interference, and have given their support to a peaceful resolution of the situation. No one can forget the prophetic call of Pope Francis to fasting and prayer to spare Syria the throes of a fatal attack threatened by the United States.

The Lord answered the prayers of his Church! He spared the people of Syria and opened perspectives of dialogue and reconciliation; the Geneva talks, has been a first sign. “Geneva” is for us a great source of hope; we are praying day and night so that it may do

more efforts trying again and again to attain its objectives and call for a third meeting in order to promote dialogue and reconciliation between belligerents. We ask all our Christian brothers of the world to join with us, praying and acting so that the instigation to war will end and so the process of dialogue may succeed, for the greater good of all Syrians.

The tragedy which struck Mossul in Irak and the violence perpetrated by the Islamic State, persecuting and slaughtering Christians in the worse salvage way, has been a shocking spectacle for the whole world and depressing for the Christians in this suffering Eastern Church, in prey of incredible discrimination. No wonder if we see our people trying to leave the country by all means. They are scared and anxious about the future. This is a terrible spectacle for us Pastors in charge of that terrorized community, we share in the suffering of our faithful and we do whatever possible to help them resist and be confident in a better future in their country. We try to let them share our Ecclesial preoccupations, and be aware of the mission the Lord has given us, we have to bear witness in this blessed country where the Church has begun, twenty centuries ago, its apostolic wonderful march in direction of all the nations!

The emigration problem is one of the greatest we have to confront now a day. You consider without any doubt the preoccupations and sadness of a Bishop of Aleppo, actual successor of the *apostles*, *designed* on a very long list of recorded predecessors, going on without stop from the third century until now, and you understand, I am sure, his suffering when he see the departure and, God forbid, collapse of this secular (let us say millennium) Community, and in a way or another the disappearance of the Christian presence in this holy land blessed with the blood of hundreds of thousands of martyrs.

Why this relentless harassment and opposition by the West against our country? Why all these obstacles to the Geneva process? Why throw oil on the fire and supply arms to the warring factions instead of working for peace and engaging in dialogue in order to come to an agreement and reconciliation as promoted by His Holiness Pope Francis? All of these questions haunt the Christians of our country and we would beg that this honorable assembly ask these same questions to the personalities who make decisions in this wonderful Nation whose humanitarianism and generous dedication for needy people we have always admired. Could you please submit this proposition to your colleagues and friends, that they may act with all men of good will, in order to establish peace and serenity in our beloved country.

May all the decisions makers join His Holiness Pope Francis in his concern toward suffering people in this world as he says in his Message on the World day of Peace last January:

“Many conflicts are taking place amid general indifference. To all those who live in lands where weapons impose terror and destruction, I assure you of my personal closeness and that of the whole Church, whose mission is to bring Christ’s love to the defenseless victims of forgotten wars through her prayers for peace, her service to the wounded, the starving, refugees, the displaced and all those who live in fear. The Church also speaks out in order to make leaders hear the cry of pain of the suffering and to put an end to every form of hostility, abuse and the violation of fundamental human rights”.

In short it is useless to insist: if the civil war in Syria is prolonged, it will necessarily overflow on the neighboring territories. Unfortunately we notice that happening, day after day. You can imagine the cruel picture ahead with the tragic consequences to the Christian presence in Syria and in the surrounding countries. I am actually convinced that our first task is to struggle for peace in our land and in our region and we need in that your support and help. We know the task is arduous and difficult but we Christians also know that He in whom we have put our trust is faithful and never abandons his own, He who came to stay with his own, will never leave them to fend for themselves.

Finally, we look forward with a great hope that this Calvary which cuts through our country will soon end and that peace will return so that our faithful can return to work in peace and find once again a normal life, in security and in an atmosphere of serenity and mutual understanding among all the citizens of this beloved country.

Aleppo September 25, 2014

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