
Mahmoud and Halima's Christmas in Syria. Father Hanna (Idlib): "Praying for peace in front of the manger"

The story of Mahmoud, a young Sunni Muslim, his wife Halima and their daughter Liberty, told to SIR by Father **Hanna Jallouf**, a Syrian Franciscan friar at the Custody of the Holy Land, parish priest in Knaye - one of three Christian villages in the Orontes Valley (the two other villages are Yacoubieh and Gidaideh), situated at only 50 km from Idlib, capital of the Governorate bearing the same name, the last remaining stronghold controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra) Islamist rebels opposed to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.



On Saturday, December 17, at the Vatican, Pope Francis presented Father Hanna with the 'Flower of Gratitude', a recognition promoted by the Dicastery for the Service of Charity, in remembrance of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and to mark the 25th anniversary of the Saint's death, commemorated this past September 5. Father Hanna has been devoting his efforts to the poor people in Syria, regardless of religion or ethnicity, since the beginning of the war that broke out in March 2011. The story of Mahmoud emerged in this context.



celebrated for the first time in 30 years in a convent in Damascus, distant from his community spread across the three Christian villages in the Orontes, "a small flock" of just over 1,000 people. This time, Holy Mass will be celebrated by his confrere, Father Luai Bsharat, in St Joseph's Church in Knaye. In fact, the two friars are the only remaining priests in the area, because "when the war broke out, all the remaining priests and religious fled. Many Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches and places of worship were either destroyed or set ablaze. These included the convent in Ghassanie." **The birth of Liberty.** "The war had just broken out," Father Hanna recalls, "and there were already thousands of internally displaced persons and refugees. The new wing of our convent was completed in 2007 and we decided to use it as a sanctuary for all those who had been forced to flee and leave everything behind. We divided it into three areas, one for Sunnis, one for Shiites and one for Christians, thereby accommodating a large number of refugees. The Divine Providence has never left us short of anything. During that time, a young spouse, a Sunni Muslim named Mahmoud, came up to me and told me that his wife was pregnant but that giving birth would be unsafe because there were no doctors or hospitals in the village. So he asked me if I could contact the Syrian Armed Forces and ask them for a permit to reach the capital city, where there were hospitals and clinics. After receiving the permit - not without some difficulty - the young couple managed to leave the village. Several days later, a baby girl was born - the first-born - and her parents decided to name her 'Liberty' in Arabic." The memories of the past are intertwined with those of today, when the family returned and, says Father Hanna, "the father, Mahmoud, and the mother, Halima, introduced me to Liberty, who is now almost 11 years-old and goes to school. "We returned to thank you for the birth of Liberty" they said.

"We also came back to remain here in Knaye, the village that welcomed us and allowed us to regain some dignity and hope."



Liberty's birth gives rise to a further question: "Many Muslims ask us why, as Christians, we have never left our villages," says the Franciscan friar. "The answer is to be found in the Bible, which says that we must be salt of the earth and light of the world by bearing witness to our faith, through brotherly love, solidarity and sharing with those most in need, seeing Christ's face in all of them. Pope Francis always reminds us of this." As Christmas draws near, Father Hanna's thoughts go to his Christian community in Knaye and to the nearby villages of Gidadieh and Yacoubieh. "Just a small nativity scene placed under the church altar for them, as it has been for years. No Christmas lights, no bells or crosses outside. We carry the Light in our hearts," points out the friar, "and we try to bestow it on those we meet. The prayer that accompanies us and unites us is for the cradle of Jesus to be filled with peace for the many war-torn countries in the world. Ukraine above all. We pray to the Child Jesus in the manger that the Light may defeat the darkness of war."

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