
Turkey - Syria earthquake: Bertogli (Antakya), "Now the priority is to survive"

"Now the priority is to survive, we will think about the rest at a later stage. The situation is apocalyptic": Father **Domenico Bertogli**, an 86-year-old Capuchin friar originally from the Italian city of Modena, currently in Istanbul, speaks about his Antakya, where according to the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' followers were called 'Christians' for the first time. Father Dominic served as parish priest of the small local Catholic community for 35 years. Since the earthquake of February 6 he has been in touch, "though it is not always possible", with Father Francis, his confrere and parish priest of the Catholic church dedicated to the Saints Peter and Paul. Antakya is located in the southwestern Turkish province of Hatay, less than 200 kilometres from Gaziantep, one of the most heavily earthquake-hit cities. Just like Antakya. According to estimates provided by the Turkish authorities, at least 12,391 people died and 63,000 were injured. Yet the toll is rising constantly.



[. "Many more victims are lying under the rubble," he told SIR. "We are fighting against time to save as many human lives as we possibly can. The city, with a population of at least 200,000, was almost completely devastated by the earthquake, especially the old part of the city. Unfortunately this is not the only case, as we are seeing similar tragedies in other localities of Turkey's 10 earthquake-affected provinces with each passing hour. An estimated 13.2 million Turks are reported to have been affected in some way by the earthquake of February 6," said the Capuchin friar citing local media reports. But the worst-hit areas are in northern Syria, whose buildings had previously been damaged by the war." Father Domenico also reports on the damage: "all the buildings have been damaged, the Orthodox and Protestant churches and mosques have collapsed. Even the beautiful 17th century minaret that used to be right opposite our church no longer exists. The local Catholic church suffered damages, as did some of our other houses that had been renovated. However, the extent of the damage and of the disaster are yet to be determined. I learned that the town's prefecture was destroyed and a new prefect was appointed from Ankara because there is no news of the previous prefect." Not least because, he concedes, "there is limited communication." **Open convents.** It is not always possible to speak with the two confreres in Antakya: Father Francis and Father Royston. "The two friars - we were told by the Capuchin Missions of the Emilia-Romagna region - are now sleeping in their vehicles because the convent is unsafe. Two minibuses left from Mersin with various relief items to be brought to the Antakya monastery. We have no idea if and when they will reach their destination" says Father Bertogli. "They are also delivering gasoline to power generators, since they have no electricity or running water. After the earthquake they came together with some neighbouring families in the garden of the convent, where they feel safer, during the continuing tremors. No deaths in the Catholic community have been reported so far, but there have been some among the Orthodox faithful." Rescue operations are also struggling with blocked roads full of mud and debris: "Each person is offering a helping hand in these tragic hours, regardless of ethnicity or religion. We are all men and women facing the same destiny", "There are constant requests for tents, blankets and food supplies arriving from the city. Now the priority is to survive, we will think about the rest at a later stage. The earthquake wiped out everything and the population survives by the day." **The Missions' relief operations.** The Missions of the Capuchin Friars of Emilia-Romagna are taking action to meet material needs \(<https://www.centromissionario.it/wp/>\) The Missions reported: "all our missionaries in Turkey are](#)

currently facing a tragic situation, as is the entire Turkish population. We can say that they are safe and in good health, obviously they are still shocked by the severity of the earthquake, but despite the difficulties they have put themselves at the service of the local population, delivering food, water and all sorts of assistance." Besides Antakya, the Capuchins opened the doors of their friary in Mersin, where about 60 people are housed in the living room, some of them arrived from Iskenderun.

Daniele Rocchi