

Turkey-Syria earthquake: Aleppo, first-hand account of Archbishop Jeanbart "it's a miracle that I'm alive"

"I was woken up by the earthquake. There was a terrible tremor that felt like it would never end, followed by others, lasting a minute, maybe two, I don't know. It was shocking. I remained motionless, unable to move, so I asked the Lord to help me." Speaking to SIR from Aleppo, Msgr. **Jean-Clement Jeanbart**, Archbishop Emeritus of the Melkite Greek Catholics, recounts the traumatic moments of last February 6 earthquake that wreaked havoc on Turkey and Syria, leaving more than 41,000 dead and tens of thousands injured. The tremors completely disintegrated the bishop's residence to the point that "it's a miracle that I'm still alive", he said. "Unfortunately", he adds with sadness, "the same cannot be said for my confrere Father Imad Daher, who lived in my same building and died from the collapse."



"There was no sign of what I was about to witness - recalls Msgr. Jeanbart -. The door to my room was closed but I couldn't open it. When I finally managed to unlock it, all I saw before me was a metre of floor still standing, because the rest of the building had collapsed. There was nothing left, its six floors had crumbled one on top of the other, like a house of cards. That's when I realised I was unscathed. So I quickly put on some clothes and tried to work my way out." Those frantic moments were marked by "an uninterrupted string of phone calls from priests and friends, all wanting to make sure that I was safe. I later learned that several of them had seen the building collapse and feared the worst." "With some luck I managed to reach the balcony that had not been damaged. Here the rescuers - in those moments I saw them as angels - made their way up to me with ladders, pulled me out of the rubble I was surrounded by and rescued me. It was a miracle, I only sustained a small scratch". "I am 79 years old and I had never witnessed anything close to this devastation, not even during the war in Aleppo. A few hours later, rescuers recovered the body of Father Daher, whose funeral we celebrated here in Aleppo a few days ago, attended by 1,500 faithful. He was buried in his village in southern Lebanon". **"We are not starting from scratch."** The thoughts of Msgr. Jeanbart, now safely housed in the Latin parish, go to the people of Aleppo suffering an "immense human toll from the war, from poverty, from COVID, and now from the earthquake", he says. "I had hoped to spend the rest of my years praying, writing, meditating, visiting my family, resting after 53 years of intense work," he admits. "But now I feel it is necessary to make a new start. We did it during the war, we will do it again now by rebuilding Aleppo." "The scale of destruction is overwhelming, dramatic - says the archbishop -. "It would shock anyone. But we are not starting from scratch." Msgr. Jeanbart's voice picks up in tone and vigour as he informs SIR that "all the buildings we built for Christians and for the most vulnerable residents throughout the years are standing, the same goes for the healthcare centres, vocational training facilities, the solidarity emporium. They must be reopened as soon as possible and relaunched. It shows that they were built properly", he points out with a smile.



During the years that he served as archbishop for the Melkite Christians in Aleppo, thanks to the support of numerous Churches, including Italy, and of Church organisations such as Caritas and Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Monsignor Jeanbart promoted more than 20 projects that resulted in the construction or renovation of several hundred housing facilities. "The last 94 houses were handed over to young Christian families just a month ago," says the prelate. This initiative likewise led to the opening of schools, day hospitals and vocational training workshops for nurses, beauticians, carpenters, mechanics, plumbers and electricians, where thousands of young people received professional training. "They are Aleppo's legacy today, not the rubble. These people can make a positive contribution to post-earthquake reconstruction because they are professionally qualified," the archbishop proudly points out. "The future of Aleppo will depend on these people, However - he warns - it's important for them to remain. The earthquake pushes people to flee, to emigrate. This worries me." **"Hope against all hope."** In Scriptural tradition, Syria is the land of St Paul, so this, the prelate points out, "is a time to hope against all hope."

"The challenge ahead of us is to remain here and rebuild," he says.

"Many people are sleeping in vehicles or in shelters because they are afraid. They were left without everything: water, food, electricity, fuel. The Churches are doing their utmost to bring material and moral relief to the victims of the earthquake. Emergency aid is arriving, but the confidence and hope of the population living in anxiety must be restored." "Lifting the sanctions would be an important step. It would mean revitalising our country, which needs help but which nevertheless has the human strength and capacity needed to stand on its own two feet again. Let us hope that the earthquake will touch the hearts of the international community." With this hope in mind, Msgr. Jeanbart concludes: "I want to thank all the Churches for the assistance provided over the years. My gratitude also goes to the Italian Church, which has consistently stood by us and continues to do so. I learned about the collection for the earthquake victims that will be launched on March 26. These are important gestures that enhance feelings of unity and communion. Just over 10 days after the earthquake, seeing the destruction that surrounds us, I came to this conclusion: Aleppo must be revived."

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