
Syria earthquake. The visit of Bishop Baturi – CEI - to Syrian Christians: "You are not alone. The Italian Church is by your side"

"To meet, to know and to help": these three verbs, in a nutshell, describe the solidarity visit to Aleppo, Syria, from Feb. 27 to March 5, undertaken by Msgr. Giuseppe Baturi, Secretary General of the Italian Bishops' Conference, accompanied by Fr. Leonardo Di Mauro, head of the Service for charitable action for Third World countries. "The message we wished to convey to our Syrian brothers and sisters with our presence is 'you are not alone: you form part of our history and our faith.' Sending aids is not enough, we need to make them feel that they share in the breath of the universal Church.

Italy's long-standing tradition enables it to do this successfully." The purpose of the visit was "to reaffirm the Italian Church's solidarity with the population and identify ways to make the assistance offered through the local projects financed via the 'Eight per thousand' funds more effective."



Syrian churches reaching out. Bishop Baturi describes a population "tried by almost 13 years of devastating war, afflicted by the sanctions imposed on it and devastated by the recent earthquake. Over the past few days we spoke with all the Catholic bishops, with the Orthodox bishops and with representatives of other Christian denominations, and we saw that despite their small number, the Christian community is shouldering the burden of the overall serious situation." It is a wide-ranging commitment, actively pursued since the outbreak of the war and during the pandemic, concretized in "educational programs, for combating poverty and unemployment", explains the Secretary General of the Italian Bishops' Conference. And now, with the earthquake, it is being carried out "through projects to monitor residential buildings damaged by the earthquake and to progressively reintegrate into their homes the people who were forced to leave them after the quake."

For Msgr. Baturi, in the above situation, the Italian Church's contribution to reconstruction can be of two kinds. "First of all, economic and financial aid, which is necessary to sustain the many ongoing projects, including a health care project promoted by Card. Mario Zenari, apostolic nuncio to Syria, called 'Open Hospitals,' run by the AVSI Foundation at local level, offering free treatment to the poorest and most vulnerable Syrians in three Catholic hospitals, two in Damascus and one in Aleppo, and in five dispensaries." Secondly, support for vocational training and education programs run by the Pro Terra Sancta Association (ATS), operating in conjunction with the Custody of the Holy Land. The future belongs to young people and they are the ones we need to invest in." Msgr. Baturi said he was very impressed by the ATS project called 'A Name and a Future,' which offers special care and protection to all orphaned and abandoned children in Aleppo, especially those children born from acts of sexual violence, frequently occurring under the Islamic State's occupation. "I would like to mention

- adds the Secretary of the Italian Bishops' Conference - the assistance given to earthquake survivors by Franciscan and Salesian friars who provide thousands of meals every day. We want to be supportive of all these realities with the 'Eight per thousand' tax funds and with whatever we manage to collect in the fundraising initiative promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference for next March 26." The Italian Bishops' Conference has allocated over €12 million to Syria since 2013 for the implementation of 17 projects, including "Open Hospitals," run by the AVSI Foundation .

Sanctions and Christians fleeing the Country. During the meetings with the Syrian episcopate concerns emerged regarding economic sanctions and the risk of the 'Christian depopulation' of the country. "The Syrian bishops," says Msgr. Baturi, "are calling for a substantial discontinuation of the sanctions that are impacting the primary needs of the population. The sanctions occasionally prevent the availability of drugs, spare parts for medical equipment, and remittances from family members of Syrians living abroad. Ninety percent of the population in Syria live below the poverty line. Those who imposed the sanctions," remarks the Secretary General of the Italian Bishops' Conference, "had a goal that has not been accomplished. Now it is necessary to focus on the livelihood of these people." Moreover, the Christian presence in Syria, "a veritable centre of social balance across the entire Middle East, depends on the improvement of people's living conditions. That is why it is necessary to help local Christians - whose presence has dropped considerably - to remain in Syria, where they were born. We had the opportunity to meet with Christians who are still living in areas controlled by anti-regime militias and who bear witness to a sincere faith that exposes them to daily risks."



Lebanon. Before returning to Italy, Msgr. Baturi made a stopover in Lebanon, whose " tragic political, economic and financial situation, with serious repercussions on neighbouring Syria, is underestimated." "In Lebanon there are approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, a third of all residents, in addition to Palestinian refugee camps, which is why an overarching approach is needed," pointed out Secretary of the Italian Bishops' Conference. The international community must turn its attention to Lebanon, a successful experience of coexistence, dialogue and participation, which is now facing a situation of severe instability."

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