

Syria. Father Jallouf (new vicar of Aleppo): “Pacify the hearts of Syrians”

"First of all, I am grateful to the Church and to the Holy Father for this new mission entrusted to me. I know that I am not worthy, but may God's will be done. Perhaps it is because I have broad shoulders (he smiles, Ed's note.) that the Lord has given me a bigger cross than the one I am carrying now". Father **Hanna Jallouf** is the parish priest of Knaye, one of three Christian villages in the Orontes Valley - along with Yacoubieh and Gidaideh - just a few dozen kilometres from Idlib, an area still controlled by the Islamist rebels of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al Nusra) fighting against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Since the outbreak of the Syrian war (March 2011), Father Hanna, a Franciscan friar of the Custody of the Holy Land, with the help of his confrere, Father Luai Bsharat, has dedicated himself to the service of the poorest and to keeping together the small local Christian community - just over 1,100 'souls', including Latin, Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians - with its centre in the monasteries of St Joseph and Our Lady of Fatima. This service earned him the Flower of Gratitude, awarded to him by Pope Francis last December. 

Father Hanna and Father Luai are the only clerics left in the area because, as the friar recalls, "when the war broke out, all the priests who were there either left or fled. Many Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches and places of worship were destroyed or burned down. Our monastery in Ghassanie was one of them. Fr. Hanna was kidnapped by Islamists in October 2014, along with 20 of his faithful. They were all released after a few days. "This experience made us return stronger and more steadfast in the faith," he told SIR. "We did not flee from persecution, so today Christians can continue to live in their villages." **Christians' fears.** On July 1, Pope Francis appointed Father Hanna Apostolic Vicar for the Apostolic Vicariate of Aleppo, which extends its jurisdiction over Latin Rite Catholics in Syria. For this reason, he will be leaving his parish in Knaye "in a few days" to go to Aleppo. "I have always been a parish priest, a shepherd among the people, and this is all new to me. I will have to see and learn, because I have a larger flock to look after," he explained. I will spend the next few weeks visiting all the parishes and getting to know them. "The news of the appointment was received with some tears by the faithful of the three Orontes villages," said Father Hanna, "because they are afraid that they will be left alone. But I told them that I would continue to accompany them with prayer, friendship, affection and pastoral commitment. Admittedly, after so many years, I cannot hide my fear of leaving them. They are Christians rooted in this land, which has suffered greatly from war, poverty, persecution and, most recently, from last February's earthquake.



The local Christian population has suffered many forms of abuse over the years, including expropriation, theft, kidnapping, confiscation of homes and land. In addition, religious services can only be held inside the church. Churches are not allowed to display crosses, bells, holy images or statues outside. Father Hanna and Father Luai are also forbidden to wear their habits outside the monastery. Despite all this, the priest has managed to maintain contact with Islamist groups. **Greetings from the jihadists.** "I couldn't believe my eyes," said Father Hanna, "I saw one of the rebel leaders come up to me to congratulate me on my appointment. He greeted me and asked me about my plans for the future. I said that I would continue to pacify the hearts of the people, to promote mutual forgiveness and peace. Peace will never be achieved if we continue to think only of revenge.

"With kindness and humility, as St Francis taught us, we can dialogue with everyone, even with jihadists."

"I am leaving a more tranquil community," the cleric added. "We have secured the restitution of

property for all our faithful. We regained some of our dignity before the population and the Islamic courts. This was possible because we never used weapons against them but only love, tolerance. This is a very strong sign that promoted coexistence. I will carry with me from Knaye and the villages of the Orontes the affection and openness to others, whatever their faith and ethnicity". In Knaye, Father Hanna also left the parish church of St Joseph, completely rebuilt after the earthquake of last February 6. "We rebuilt it together and consecrated it on Sunday July 2 in the presence of many faithful who had come from our villages. It was a great joy for all." **Episcopal ordination.** Father Hanna will be ordained a Bishop on 17 September in Aleppo, in the Church of St Francis, by the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Oriental Churches, Msgr. Claudio Gugerotti. He will be accompanied by the Apostolic Nuncio in Syria, Card. Mario Zenari, the Custos of the Holy Land, Fr Francesco Patton, and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa. "This day marks the Feast of the Stigmata of St Francis. I have chosen this date because our country, Syria, is bleeding. Let us hope that the Blood of Christ will heal it from war and poverty". The choice of his episcopal motto is equally significant: "It is the same motto of my priestly ordination: 'I am among you as one who serves', the words of Jesus to the Apostles on Holy Thursday," Father Hanna concluded. It is a mission that he will now continue as a bishop.

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