Christians
In the chaos
Of Syria
Sunday of the Golden Rule
The Second Sunday in Advent December 4th 2016

« So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them! »

Matthew 7:12

Syrian Childhoods in exile
How can we talk about Syria? It is a confusing and changing situation! In mid-summer, when these lines are written, the opposition looks like winning in Aleppo, whereas some days before it was supposed to be defeated. And Turkey, governed with an iron fist by an islam-conservative president who somehow tolerates if not encourages aggressions against Syria from his country. After an attempted coup, Turkey brings closer to Russia, a great support of Syrian government, pluri-religious and officially secular. And in Syria, the so-called secular opposition established a partnership with Front Al Nostra, which changed its name, abandoned its allegiance to Al Qaeda, remaining committed to its ideology: imposing its own version of Sharia!

Our record of the important dates of the conflict (page 4) is evolving all the time! In these confrontations, in superposition, there are a civil war, internal to Syria, a regional war, an international war with actors coming from all over the world, a sunnit-shiit war, without forgetting to mention ISIS, fighting against the rest of the world... Nothing is simple, except the suffering of this country’s inhabitants, where most of the families have lost members, friends, and where a large number was compelled to leave letting behind them all they had, or at worst, to go into exile unsafely. And what about these refugees, women or girls who are victims of all these human trafficking?

But is it the role of a missionary organization to interfere in political affairs? ACO always showed restraint. In the same time, we cannot ignore that the situation is weighing heavily on the everyday life of ACO partners in Syria and in Lebanon. All their projects were upset by this crisis, indeed, the map of protestant presence was changed, the supported work of social institutions - in Homs, Aleppo, Beirut for instance - was disrupted. And the numerous Christian faiths are somehow closing ranks facing this major crisis.

To talk with them, to pray for them there are elements we cannot ignore. This issue of Levant wants above all, to turn towards those who in situ and against all odds, try to remain the witnesses of the Gospel. Other awkward question: Why do the Christians, almost unanimously, support the regime? Rev. Jean-Claude Basset addressed this issue and proposes us some keys (page 8)! Is it a religious war, Islam against Christianity, as it is often said or an internal battle inside Islam, in which Christians are collateral victims? The theologian Mary Mikhael provides us reflection elements about it (page 6).

T.W.
Arab Spring» broke out in December 2010, with popular upheavals extending from January 2011 to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya then to Syria (March). In the first three cases, dictators, worn out by decades of absolute power, were swept away by the revolt (helped by NATO troops under UN mandate in Libya). The Syrian case is different. President Bachar Al Assad had a real popularity in his country, for, unlike his father, he stopped pressure his people and liberalized somehow the economy (for Assad’s family benefit too).

Since 2011, the conflict developed without any solution in sight. Grim statistics show that the human losses in 2016 were about 270,000. The internal displaced would be between 7 and 10 million, according to UNHCR, there are 4.6 million refugees who fled from Syria, of which 1.6 million for Lebanon alone (the population of Lebanon is 4.2 million). In other words, half of the Syrian population had to leave.

Actually, there is a superposition of three conflicts: An internal conflict between the strong authoritarian government and opponents who want to overthrow it.

A more general conflict between a sunnite axis (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) and a shiite axis (Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, which brings a military support to the Syrian regime).

An international conflict with the presence of people from 83 nationalities, the involvement of Russia, of the USA, France, Great-Britain...

Moreover, ISIS used this chaos to create its «capital» in Syria, Raqqa and does not recognize any other authority. Besides, the Kurdish people has a strong desire to have its own state and plays an important military role in Iraq. The Kurds rule...
a Syrian area with the tacit agreement if Syria and
in the same time are combated in Turkey.

Christians are somehow collateral victims of
this bloody imbroglio, for they are not directly
involved in any of these conflicts. To present the
conflict as a confessional conflict by most of the
protagonists means significant threats, for Syria
may splinter - a mosaic country, like Lebanon, split
in small weak states. And Christians spread all
over the territory would be the main losers. This is
not the major reason we should keep in mind to
refuse this « solution », only attractive to someone
unaware of eastern realities : It would mean that it
is not possible to live together, Kurds, Druzes,
Sunites, Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Jews... and
that inevitably in this country, majority would
Crush or discriminate the minorities.

Major key events

A complete chronology would take up too much
room. Here are the key events of these past five
years:

The rebellion began in March 2011, when young
tenagers were arrested (and tortured) because they
wrote hostile slogans against the government, in
Deraa: manifestations blew up in Aleppo, Hassakah,
Deraa, Deir-Ezzor Hama and Damascus.

Repression was violent and the non-violent side
was replaced by fierce scenes of violence. Numerous
officers resigned and created the Free Syrian Army.
Other rebels, in particular of foreign origin, were
emerging.

February 26th 2012: 57.4 % of Syrian electors
went to the polls and approved the new constitution
which paved the way of pluralism with 89.4 %.

Progressively, Iran played an increasingly impor-
tant role in this conflict. Lebanese politic parties deci-
ded unanimously to stay away from the Syrian
conflict, which was respected unless by the Hezbollah,
strongly involved in the fights alongside the Syrian
government army.

July 2012: Aleppo then, was drawn into the
conflict... and the battle has been continuing until
today.

February 2013: Raqqa was taken by rebels.

April 2013: Two bishops were kidnapped: Mgr
Boulos Yazigi, Metropolitan of Aleppo for orthodox
Greeks and Mgr. Youhanna Ibrahim, Metropolitan of
Aleppo for the orthodox Syriacs. One never saw them
again. July 2013: Father Paolo Dall Oglio was kidnapp-
ed and is still missing.

June 2013: The city of Qousseir (Lebanese bor-
der) was taken back by the army, with the Hezbollah
support.

August 2013: Chemical weapons were used
against soldiers and civilians. The regime was accused.
Different military options were considered by Western
forces.

September 2013: Russia and Syria announced
that Syria wanted to stop producing chemical weapons
and accepted the dismantling of the existing stock.

March 2014: Kessab, mainly populated by
Armenians was attacked by Al Nostra, which easily
crossed the Turkish border. Kessab was taken back by
the army in June 2014.

March 2014: Near the Lebanese border, the
« Krak des chevaliers » dominates the « Christians
valley ». The Krak, been occupied for two years by
rebels who used to shell Christians villages of this
valley, was finally taken back by regular army.

May 2014: An agreement arose between the
government and the rebels to secure the evacuation of
rebels from the old town. There was another agree-
ment in December 2015. Rebels surrendered in Idleb,
an Al Nostra-held city.

Summer 2014 - Summer 2015: ISIS occupied a
great part of Iraq (especially Mosul) and Syria and
took Raqqa as the capital of its « caliphate ». The army
moved back on several fronts particularly because of
the constitution of a jihadist front « the army of
conquest » with the main actor Al Nostra front (Syrian
version of Al Qaeda). This army of conquest is finan-
ced by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

September 2015: A massive military interven-
tion of Russia allowed the army to recover.

These strikes could only be added to those of the
international coalition aiming at strategical sites of
ISIS, which progressively lost its oil revenues and
which also experienced setbacks in Iraq. The very
discreet intervention of American, British and French
special forces also contributed to ISIS retreat.

March 2016: The strategic town of Tadmor and
the ancient city of Palmrya were taken back by the
army with the support of Russia. Not long after that,
Russia announced that it withdrew its army from
Syria.

Peace negotiations under UN in 2016 did not
give better result than previous attempts.

April-Summer 2016: Aleppo battle increased dra-
matically.

Chronology, Synthesized version
Thomas Wild
In the beginning of what is called the Arab Spring, from Tunisia to Syria, one would say the events were all related to the need for reform, freedom and social justice. Issues wanted by all people in those countries. However, the concept of religion with islamic religious slogans, soon became even the main issue controlling all events to one degree or another. In Tunisia, changes happened, but also Islamic ideas appeared and became a practice.

In Libya, political, social, and religious issues, all mixed together. However, as never before a group of Christians - of Egyptian citizenship - were shuttered publicly just because they are Christians and have had nothing to do with the events. All those involved in the violence were non Christians, so why the Christians are being targeted, one can not but ask. The intensity of the use of islamic slogans became phenomenal.

In Egypt, while it began peaceful - a revolution - requesting change, reform. Justice and freedom, ended with deep religious nature. Islamic fundamentals took control of the country. A Brotherhood muslim became the president. All contrary to the request of the revolution's request to start with. Meanwhile, the Christian community in many parts of Egypt became a target. It is said that over a hundred churches were attacked in several parts of the country, priests were killed and an obvious enmity against the Christians was not hidden.

Thus, in all these countries, while Christians are not involved in the acts of violence they were attacked. Why, is a question that can not be avoided.

The case in Syria

Contrary to all Arab countries, Syria was considered as a secular country, religion is respected but not a separating social issue. « Religion belongs to God, and the country belongs to all » was a the common slogan.

Again, like it was in Tunisia and in Egypt, when the events began in 2011, events began as a movement requesting reform, more social justice, more freedom, more participation... Issues that all needed to be reformed. A change to reform and renew Syria was needed and the majority of people would support.
It is a fact that Syria never claimed democracy as such, however Syrian people enjoyed relative freedom and near perfect security. But also Syria was controlled by a political party for forty years. And the ruling majority came from the muslim group « Alawite » which dose not represent the majority of the Syrians.

Very early in the Syrian situation, outside factors appeared to be among the players. And Arab voices, were heard requesting the change of the regime. Even Turkey started demanding that the president of the Syrian Republic steps down. Thus, the majority of the Syrian people began to ask, what has Turkey or any other country to do with Syria? And what any outsider knows about what the Syrian people want?

When a sniper on one roof in the city of Homs-not speaking Arabic- asks if he was in Gaza... And when the term « Allaho Akbar » became used when cutting some one’s head, and when outside groups started coming through the Turkish borders claiming Jihad, and that Syria is the land of prophet Muhammad, and they came to die in it... religious slogans, and the use and abuse of religion to gather emotions... All started thinking and analysing that what is going on is surely related to religion.

Is the war in Syria a religious war?

And came the events in Iraq, and the appearance of ISIS/ISIL¹ claiming the establishment of an islamic state and appointing a khalif, then safely one would say the War is surely a religious war. Or in fact turned into a religious war no matter how it began.

Controlling parts of Iraq and parts of Syria in the north East, and announcing the Islamic state, made the christian community feel the real threat for it’s presence and for it’s future. This feeling was not imaginary, as in some areas christians were given choices such as: convert to Islam, leave the country, or be killed. In other areas, if christians choose to stay in their homes they had to pay « jizia » ². Thus, many christian have left and became displaced in their own country or even emigrated to wherever they could.

It has turned into a religious war as religion has become abused and misused. While many christian persons have been killed or kidnapped and their homes destroyed and have lost their livelihood, and priests kidnapped or killed, even two bishops been kidnapped never to be known where about for almost three years, the christian Churches destroyed, and christian institutions attacked, even christian old monasteries and historical sites all have been targeted. Yet one has to be true and say that many muslim have been killed.

Indeed, the muslim families have suffered much and the number of dead muslims is beyond count- hundreds of thousands have lost their lives and all they ever had. We have a saying, that «when Sunni and Shii fight the Christians get under the feet of the horses ».

Will such a war among muslims drive the christians out of the Land where christianity was born and from where first christian missionaries went to the world? God forbid. As the church is built on the rock of ages, and the power of death shall not prevail against it.

O God be the glory. Amen

MARY MIKAEL
Ex-President of the N.E.S.T, Beirut
Near East School of Theology

¹ Daech, means Islamic State, in English ISIS for « Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ». These names are synonyms.
² « jizya » means a tax, a toll. The most important constraint for non Muslim people, subjects of a Muslim state (dhimmis) is to pay this tax (jizya). (from Les cahiers de l’Islam website).
Past and present

Syrian Christians and Bachar Al-Assad Regime

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE PROXIMITY OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANS WITH THE ESTABLISHED POWER, A SITUATION WHICH MAY LEAD TO A MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN WESTERN AND EASTERN CHRISTIANS?

A gap of misunderstanding

« What is striking when you are talking to Christians, from the Patriarch to the refugees, is their support to the Syrian regime, they consider as the only one able to stop the islamists and to protect them... and they criticize the Western countries, Europe and France which, they think, suffer from blindness. »

With these words, Patrick Karam, president of the Coordination of Eastern Christians at risk, back from a situation assessment in Syria in April 2016, shows the gap between media and political discourses we can hear in Europe, on behalf of human rights. How to understand the lack of understanding between Eastern and Western Christians?

Back into the past

The Muslims took Damascus in 635 and the Muslim expansion was made at the expense of Christian communities which saw a slow decrease of their members and of their influence with the status of protected - dhimmi - giving them religious freedom in exchange for a specific tax and restrictions in social and political life. To be true a relatively favorable regime in these times of prosperity but a source of discriminations and repressions in economic and political crisis.

We can see a gap from the time of the Crusades and more recently during the European colonization. Indeed, Christians has been readily regarded as natural allies of invaders!

A look at the news

The rapid globalization strengthened the reject of Western countries in favor of a growing Islamization of Middle-East societies under the influence of Muslim Brothers and the Saudi regime. Therefore, there is a marginalization of Christians, even in Lebanon and a voluntary or imposed emigration from a whole region where Christians are facing, with other communities, a difficult situation in Turkey and in Egypt and a disastrous situation in Iraq and in Syria.

Western interventions in Afghanistan and in Iraq opened the door to a Salafist radicalization and to jihadist currents such as Al Qaida and ISIS. The human and cultural tragedy in Iraq, the evil, called «Arab Spring» and the civil war in Syria made Christians in the Middle-East more vulnerable than ever, to such an extent that their survival, as well as other minorities, is threatened: disaster of wounded, displaced, shocked people, dispersed communities and destroyed churches.

Is it therefore surprising that the majority of Syrian Christians find a relative safety in Bachar Al-Assad ‘s authoritarian but secular regime, regardless of his crimes in a context where violence prevails all around ? It is to Western Christians to listen to the witnesses and calls of Christians in the Middle-East.
The Near East School of Theology (NEST) is a theological seminary that serves the whole region of the Middle East. Located in Beirut, its governing churches from the Reformed tradition, namely the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon* and the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East have their headquarters in Lebanon, but their congregations are spread out all over Lebanon and Syria. Thus, both churches are deeply affected by the conflict in Syria. NEST’s main supplier of students have been the Syrian churches, both Arab and Armenian, and this is still the case today. Syrians are also on the faculty and among the staff at NEST. What happens in Syria, especially to churches, congregations, families and individuals affects us daily at the Seminary. In this short article, however, I would like to deal with the theological impact of the Syrian crisis on NEST, on its students, faculty, staff and alumni. What are the theological issues and questions that people in theological education are grappling with? What are the theological questions that rise to the fore in the minds of students, teachers, pastors and others who are concerned with the Syrian conflict?

What follows is not based on a statistical study; no questionnaire was circulated with questions to answer and data to fill; it is based on what I have gathered from listening to people, from observing and discussing with those closely involved in the Syrian crisis, whether in classrooms, chapel services, dining room and coffee shop discussions, public lectures and Continuing Education programs, or special seminars and workshops organized by NEST to address the Syrian situation.

One question often arises is that of the legitimacy of violence and self-defense. Is it permissible for a Christian to engage in acts of violence, in fighting and defending one’s town or neigh-

* In this frame, «national» means a church with people of the place and not a church of foreign people.
neighborhood or even one’s Christian institutions? The question is particularly sharp because it is asked by those who are in church positions, by pastors and leaders, who are the same ones who preach love, peace and a theology of the cross from the pulpit. How one deals with this question has implications for how a pastor or a congregation or a whole church gets involved in the crisis in terms of role and relations with this or that armed group. The overwhelming majority of Syrian Christian leaders in the Protestant community seem to be on the side of the present regime in Syria, and much theological debate tends to favor self-defense against “terrorist groups” and to find ways to justify acts of violence and war. But it is a question that is constantly on the mind of committed Christian people. Can Christians get blood on their hands and continue to witness to the redemptive significance of suffering?

A second issue is that of evil: how and why is God allowing all this evil to happen in Syria against innocent people? Like the first question, this is an issue that always surfaces in times of great trials and suffering. Wars shake people’s complacent attitudes and conceptions of faith and put them to the test. At a Continuing Education event held at NEST on « Pastoring in Times of War and Crisis », where many of the participants were from Syria and Iraq, the session that was devoted to « God and Evil » was the most popularly attended, and it engaged people most.

A third issue that is constantly on the minds of people is that of Islam, Christian-Muslim relations and coexistence in the Syria of tomorrow. After what seemed to be decades of harmonious and non-sectarian coexistence between Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Alawites, Kurds and other Muslims, etc., the ugliest sectarianism quickly emerged and now rules the scene. The myth of one national allegiance of a united Syrian people that denied the existence of sectarian allegiances was quickly shattered. The shock of this dramatic revelation haunts Christians in Syria, and many are re-considering their former views on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations and coexistence. To be sure a distinction is made between moderate Muslims and Islamists, but there is also deep-seated suspicion about what, if anything, counts as moderate Islam.

Fourthly, an important concern for many Protestant Syrian Christians who are connected to NEST is that of reflection on the role and place of the church in post-war Syrian society. What will the needs be for Christian presence in Syria after the conflict is over? What ministry will the church have? How will it best execute that ministry? What kind of theological education and preparation will be required for ministers and church leaders in post-war Syria? These are questions that are being seriously considered by some, especially by those committed students and pastors who want to stay and serve. It is encouraging for an institution like NEST that such questions are being asked and reflected on by some, for such questions have to do with the shape of theological education that the Seminary needs to develop for the coming years.

A fifth issue is that of emigration. Many pastors, many graduates of NEST, even some students who had enrolled at NEST, emigrated to the West with their families or ahead of them. For many of them, emigration was not an easy decision to make, but it could not be avoided for a variety of reasons. It is always an issue for people who emigrate, to reflect on or try to justify their position, not just in terms of
future, security, family considerations, etc., but also theologically. What am I saying to my church, to other Christians, and also to myself when I decide to emigrate in the face of a crisis and of suffering? What am I saying about Christian presence and witness in the Middle East when I (and my family) decide to leave for good? At the outbreak of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was teaching at Union Seminary in N.Y. He was urged by his colleagues, especially Reinhold Niebuhr to stay in the USA and make a career for himself at Union for Germany was about to go into war and he was in danger because of his anti-Nazi position. Bonhoeffer wrote to Niebuhr saying: «I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.» This is not an easy question to deal with, and I cannot say that it is often discussed in public, but I know that almost all those who are committed to their country and contemplate emigration (or have actually emigrated) struggle with it in their inmost being and try to come to terms with it.

Finally, there is a question that is, surprisingly, not very much discussed, and certainly not publicly. How is the church to relate to political power, to the established powers? Should the church always be an ally of the standing regime so as to guarantee its survival and well-being? What of its commitment to witness to the gospel of love and justice? Is «survival» the highest Christian value or witness to the truth despite the life-threatening consequence of such a witness? Is the church free to be the church in these times of civil war and upheaval?

These are some of the issues and questions that result from the impact of the Syrian situation on us at NEST and elsewhere in our churches in Syria and Lebanon. Our seminary tries to do its best by facing them rather than suppressing them, but we know quite well that easy and quick answers are not the characteristic features of theological questions.

GEORGE SABRA
President of N.E.S.T., Beirut
Syrian crisis

Actions of Protestant Churches, ACO Partners

SITUATION ON THE GROUND AFTER FIVE YEARS OF CONFLICT.

ACO France has chosen to support the church partners it knows: the Synod¹, and the Union² involved in the unprecedented humanitarian crisis that Syria, and also indirectly Lebanon, have been facing since 2011, and would not scatter its efforts. Relationships of trust have been built over the years. It is in the countries that collaboration and coordination between churches were implemented. The situation is dramatic both on security and on economical level: Syrian pound lost 90%, the minimum wage for a teacher amounts to... 100€ a month. The production in Aleppo is 1% of what it used to be before crisis...

It will be remembered that since 2015 there are reciprocal information between Western partners of the Fellowship, (Switzerland, the Netherlands, France). To avoid to overwhelm our partners with administrative requests, they are asked to make a global communication for their completed works.

ACO Fellowship includes these two Churches that existed before the present-day Syria and Lebanon. In spite of tensed relations between both countries, they could keep their unity. And the « Supreme Council », corresponding to French Federation of Protestantism (FPF), oversees both countries. So, it is possible for us to send funds via Lebanon, because after the embargo, it is no longer possible to send money to Syria. Our church partners are of modest size: for NESSL: 9 parishes in Syria, 6 in Lebanon, for the Union: 11 parishes in Syria, of which 5 in Aleppo, 6 in Lebanon. Finally, FMEEC (The Fellowship of the Middle-East Evangelical Churches) the federation of all the protestant churches in the Middle-East leads an important humanitarian work with the same partners.

Existing projects before the crisis

The projects supported by ACO Fellowship, that already existed before, were seriously impacted by the crisis, in Syria as well as in Lebanon.

- N.E.S.T., Beirut Faculty of Theology had to provide educational scholarships to Syrian students cut off from any other support.
- The Synod initiated the rehabilitation project of Homs’ retirement home (2013-2015). It began during the war and is now over. Another project is about a playground in Lattakia: the parish was greatly increased after the refugees’ influx in this area seen as a safe place.
- The Union continued its work at Church of Christ in Aleppo whereas the Rev. B’Chara led his pastoral and medical work for an often-desperate population.
- The SAC, Social Action Committee doubled its

¹ Synod is for NESSL, « National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon », a presbyterian Church in Syria and Lebanon.
² Union is for UAECNE, the « Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near-East », in Syria and Lebanon.
workforce, for the refugees’ influx overwhelmed the modest office of Union’s social aid in the Bourj Hammoud quarter.

The Union began to support Bagdad Evangelical Armenian parish in Iraq that received people fleeing the war with ISIS, bringing them basic necessities and supporting them to return to a kind of normal life.

**The increase of humanitarian work**

The Synod initiated an ambitious aid program for the refugees and internal displaced. The Presbyterian American Church gave a 6 months training for such a program, to Rev. Salam Hanna, from Homs. Mary Mikhail, a former president of the N.E.S.T., now retired, is in charge of communication on these projects (we can read frequently the information she gives us, in ACO Newsletter). In each Syrian Synod parish, there is a committee receiving requests from numerous refugees who can find there a place to be helped. These committees in coordination with Rev. Salma Hanna, try to give an answer to the refugees: so, thousands of people have found assistance.

As for the Union, a long-term aid allowed the Syrian parishes to support those who have lost their home, their work, who had to move and had not even vital necessities. This aid is made with discretion, but every month, hundreds of baskets full of food are distributed e.g. in Aleppo or Lattakia, a help to allow people for winter heating (fuel prices has gone up a great deal since ISIS controls oil and gas). Besides there are a lot of individual initiatives for mutual assistance and solidarity.

**Medical Care**

In Syria, there are no doctors anymore! The medical side of Church of Christ in Aleppo (Dental office, dispensary, family doctor) appears as essential from the very beginning of the crisis. Numerous NGOs, HCR, UN deal with emergency accommodations or alimentation, but often forget the people’s health and some of them need permanent treatments which may be expensive. In coordination with other NGOs, the churches pay the medical expenses to allow some of them to survive.

**Educational work**

Our partners are deeply involved in educational work. They take a great pride in being the first who created girl’s schools, at the 19th century. Armenian schools are still functioning in Armenian which is an essential element to keep their identity. But their budgetary balance is weakened: those who could pay fees left, those who stay or have come often are people without means. How can they pay the running costs and the teachers? The refugees’ influx of people without means in Lebanon jeopardized the running of schools, of which one had to close. The support helps to finance scholarships for these pupils.

Synod’s educational work has always been turned to excellence and to the general public. Their schools are not-for-profit but they have tuition fees. The Synod brought its expertise to the refugees in Lebanon and opened, at its expenses, 4 classes in its premises, a project that began in February 2016. The program aims to school pupils who, for some of them did never go to school before. The Syrian program is respected along with English courses.

**Kessab / Lattakia crisis in March 2014**

In March 2014, Al Nostra Front rebels crossed the Turkish frontier and displaced the inhabitants who are in majority Armenian. These internal refugees in Syria were received by Lattakia Churches of every denomination. This was mad possible thanks to international supports. After the regular Army liberated the city, in summer, the inhabitants partially came back: churches were dirty, the archives burnt. Upon their return, the members of the parishes rolled up their sleeves to tidy up everything...

**SYNTHESIZED INFORMATION**

**THOMAS WILD**

July 2016
Syrian pastors’ words

« The terrible war made us stronger! »

Rev. Bchara Moussa Oghli, in charge with Church of Christ, Aleppo, regularly shares his impressions with some of his friends who receive his mails. As most of Syrian Christians, he does not use the words rebels or opposition, but terrorists, when he mentions those who conquered large parts of Syria. After going through phases of revolt, depression too, doubt, he seems to develop a certain serenity, in spite of the ongoing fighting that threatens him as well as his wife, a teacher, and his younger daughter who just passed her bachelor degree, never be shielded from blind bombing on residential quarters. In his latest mail, he talks about the honor he feels to stay with those who are committed not to leave Aleppo and stand with them. Bchara writes: « In the everyday life the hidden God does not divest his own of the shadow of his presence and the touch of his love and goodness. Even if he seems to be a shy God ».

Rev. Haroutoune Selimian is a worldwide tireless witness of the fate of Syrian Christians; he lives in Aleppo. The school corresponding to his Armenian Evangelical Church was hit by a missile fortunately without causing any casualties.

He denounces the hypocrisy and the wickedness of assailants, who clearly want to eliminate the Christians, he draws a parallel between this situation and the Golgotha, where the evil - personified by an unholy alliance between the Temple and the Roman governor - seems to be triumphant against the man of Nazareth and where God seems to hide. Though, God gives this man, abandoned by all, the strength to resist, to understand and to serve. As the centurion acknowledges it.

Revised with permission by the ACO.

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* The original texts in English with a French translation are available in their entirety on ACO website (Syria file) www.aco-fr.org.
In his text, he says: « there is only one way in Aleppo and many times it is closed. So, the city cannot receive the food the citizen need and this is worse than being without water or electricity for both are considered to be luxury items. But nobody cares for electricity, water or clothes, life suddenly becomes very valuable ». Life menaced by bombing!

Church is alive! More alive than it has ever been. Church is still there to distribute food to all those who need it, even if it may ruin it, Church takes care of people with traumas never experienced before.

Haroutune writes: « for five years we have been experienced that Christian lessons can be put in practice even in worst conditions, when it is a matter of life and death, yes, we can love our enemy, the one who frightens the whole world... We learnt during this war to separate what matters and what does not. The buildings do not matter. Church is first of all the body of Christ and it can be celebrated everywhere. During the terrible fights at Easter, churches were full, yes sometimes there was not enough room for everyone. We are luckier than in western churches which have empty cathedrals! The terrible war made us stronger... »

Rev. Ibrahim Nseir in charge with a NESSL parish in Aleppo. His church was blasted twice, a new temporary building was built and inaugurated at Christmas 2015. Here are some excerpts of his message.

« The most important challenge the Church has to face is the correct comprehension of the Scriptures. It is not easy to speak about loving one’s enemy when people have to leave their house and their belonging have been stolen. The church has trouble to preach hope at the burial of a child who died because there is no medicine. Speaking of the risen and victorious Christ to a community who lost 60% of its members is a kind of illusion.

The second challenge is the discipline: for the requirements of the Gospel give high, different, standards of behavior and it is difficult. It is difficult to promote a spirit of giving, whereas you are more respected if you build up money. Difficult to pray for the peace when the place of worship is destroyed. Difficult to ask the thrice-Holy God for those who humiliate, destroy and kill others. But, confronting the evil, the Church is the salt of the earth and gives to the surroundings the message that it has an identity different from other organizations.

The third challenge is to acquire a spiritual maturity. To behave according to the Gospel exposes yourself to criticism when a large part of the community uses a sectarian language. You cannot escape the stare of those who are islamophobes, when you are helping a Muslim widow, narrow-minded people will blame you when you help a Kurdish family, arguing that you should only help the community... We should not lose sight of our faith, resumed in Ephesians 4:14-15: “ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. »

Finally, I learnt not to panic anymore, I learnt not to leave because I am a leader with responsibilities, I learnt not to blame, for it is not time to look for who committed a mistake, it is time to ask what is the next thing to do. I learnt to accept to be helped, for I am not perfect. I learnt what it means to be entirely dependent of God... »

Rev. Mofed Karajaily in charge with a NESSL parish in Homs. His church was blasted twice, a new temporary building was built and inaugurated at Christmas 2015. Here are some excerpts of his message.

« The second challenge is the discipline: for the requirements of the Gospel give high, different, standards of behavior and it is difficult. It is difficult to promote a spirit of giving, whereas you are more respected if you build up money. Difficult to pray for the peace when the place of worship is destroyed. Difficult to ask the thrice-Holy God for those who humiliate, destroy and kill others. But, confronting the evil, the Church is the salt of the earth and gives to the surroundings the message that it has an identity different from other organizations.

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Rev. Mofed Karajaily remains faithfully in Homs even when there were violent fightings, when the church was unusable and the community scattered in the surroundings.

There were at that moment five places of worship instead of one. The school of the...”

Homs, wounded city after 5 years of war.
Synod was closed and food aid was distributed. Mofed, at Dhour Choueir told us that for all those years he had been reading again the Apocalypse and found resources to go through these times of persecution.

We also received the messages from Boutros Zaour (Damascus) worried about the youth who cannot accept the absurd violence. Rev. Maan Bitar (Hama and Maharde) mentioned how he had to face self-defense. The theologian Rula Sleiman (Tripoli, Syrian-Lebanese border) and a lay Lina Kasho (back from the USA and living now in Lattakia) underline with examples of terrible mournings, the unimaginable scale of damages, not only at a patrimonial level, or infrastructures, but particularly at a human level.

They claim that community’s faith helps to go on, to be patient. This faith which is sustained by the constant prayer of its members and also a group of women who met every week to pray together.

Latest news: these are the remarks, Rev. Joseph Kassab (General secretary of Arab Synod) made during the opening worship of the supports network to the Synod’s Aid programs, last April.

His message drew a parallel between the story of the calming of the storm and these refugees’ lives in frail boats, who risk their lives to find shelter in countries they imagine safer. The only one question is the question asked by the disciples to Christ: « Don’t you care that we are dying? »

Where is God in these torments? Is he involved? After having reminded of many leaks stories - Moses fleeing the pharaoh, Jesus’ family fleeing Herode, the scattered community of Jerusalem - , the pastor declared loudly and clearly: « The history of exile is the history of God, it is a crisis through which Jesus himself had to suffer. For him there is no the distinction between inhabitants of a country and refugees. They are one people, his people. »

Jesus gets to heaven and his father asks him:
- Who will continue the work?
- A lot of men and women who love me.
- That’s all?, and if they don’t manage to do it?
- I did not have any other solution.

WITNESSES GATHERED
BY THOMAS WILD
July 2016
Lebanon, welcoming country

The education of Syrian Refugees’ children

BETWEEN POLITICAL IMPERATIVES AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE.

What was at the beginning, a popular uprising, in the little town of Deraa, in March 2011, against the dictatorship of Bachar al-Assad regime will propagate to a large part of the country to become a civil war which will oppose the master of Damascus and his allies to the rebels. Very rapidly, internal revolutionary dynamics will be overwhelmed by the geopolitical game with regional and international actors and the jihadists strengthening which tends today to conceal the Syrian people’s desires of emancipation.

According to the United Nations, the war in Syria provoked the worst humanitarian crisis ever seen in the world with 300,000 deaths, 7 million of internal displaced and 5 million refugees. This shock wave destabilized Lebanon which welcome 1.5 million of exiles since 2011, making of this little neighboring country, the country with the most important refugees density in the world, that means one refugee for three inhabitants. Children (less than 18 years old) are first affected by this crisis. They represent more than half of this vulnerable population for whom the access of education remains the greatest challenge of humanitarian response.

Thus, in 2015, 655,000 of school-aged Syrian children, which is twice more than Lebanese pupils in public schools, doubling the reception capacities and the requested place to meet this need. The official position of Beirut is clear: Lebanon cannot be a final destination, nor a receiving country, and least of all it is not a resettlement country. Lebanon justifies this position because it has not ratified the 1951 Genova Convention, concerning the refugee’s status. So, Lebanese authorities refuse to grant the Syrians fleeing the war, the international protection. Hence Lebanese government response remains exclusively humanitarian - aid and assistance - and rejects any form of social, or economic integration.

In this context, there is a national strategy, in the field of education Reaching all children with education, supported by international donors which can combine the imperatives of national sovereignty for Lebanon and an aid and protection to the refugees. It has been formulated to develop the resilience from the hosts communities facing Syrian crisis and limit as far as possible the devastating consequences for a lost generation who one day will be called to rebuild one’s country.

This policy will allow to double the number of Syrian schoolchildren. However then real benefit is for the children aged between 8 and 12 and living in urban areas. On the contrary, the children living in rural areas or teenagers remain largely out of school, whereas their needs are urgent. The dropout comes from learning difficulties due to the language, the transportation cost, the distance, the tensed relationships with the teachers, the insecurity and the clandestinely. This situation is a factor of destabilization for Lebanon. It carries in itself germs of Intercommunautiaries tensions.

CARINE LAHOUD-TATAR, CAROLE AL-SHARABATI
Institute of Politics Studies
University St Joseph, Beirut

Syrian refugees children at school El Kaa in the Beeka North Lebanon.
« A lost generation which will have to re-build its country.»
they reach the end...the end of the anguish, the end of loss of home and belongings, the end of threats, the end of a past life... and yet, even though they have reached this end, the problems are far from over: They must still tell or write of their experiences, then convince others to believe them. Sometimes they are even faced with the absurd. For example, after fleeing Syria and finding themselves in a Libyan refugee camp, they are considered by authorities to be «out of danger», no longer needing asylum, or even able to obtain it...

Still they arrive. In France, organisations have been set up to welcome, provide shelter and accompany them in their new life as refugees. For those involved, it is a joy to welcome them, feel they have helped make life easier and offered a place of rest. For the refugees however, it is not that simple.

The stay is probably definitive

First, they need to recover from experiences of fear and anguish; these only fade slowly, if they fade at all. The reality is, they have lost everything, they have fled war with all its horrors: the nightmares return even as peace and calm surround them in their new French homes. Children continue to cry, sometimes several months after arrival... Then wounds, physical and psychological, need to heal. The need to get used to the new status of exile, someone who will never return to their place of birth. Much as new arrivals may feel their stay will be short term, as time passes, they gradually realize that it is probably definitive...

The path to integration is not easy: they meet with racism, hostility, ignorance or plain incomprehension of their situation. Not that these attitudes of rejection are widespread, far from it, but sometimes it only takes one suspicious look for kind gestures of hospitality to be forgotten.

Courage, dignity, will

They need help at the prefecture, social security offices and school. Our way of life needs to be explained and sometimes their language needs translating! The French language is difficult to learn, and great efforts are needed to master the subtleties of Molière, but not being able to speak French means no job! They well know that they need it to be able to support themselves, to be independent of aid even though it is given so willingly...

In the end they will integrate, find work and offer their children a future. Those who remember the welcome of the French people recognize the foundations of a culture formed by generations of new arrivals, like them. It remains for us to always extend our friendship to them and show an interest in their culture so that one perhaps one day they may forget the pain of their broken dreams...
Sandra and Terry, Syrian refugees, wish they could go back in time to 2010. With a well-to-do family background, a good education, promising professional prospects, they then live in Damascus. In 2012 they both work for the public TV channel Syrian News. Terry is a producer and a music programmer. Sandra is a journalist and presents a political talk-show in which she tries hard to maintain a dialogue between the different parties. She is soon caught in a crossfire. The authorities accuse her of speaking too freely and the opposition threaten her with death, rape and kidnapping for being too close to the government and thus a traitor.

Danger and pressure become unbearable and the only issue for the couple is to leave Syria for Lebanon in December 2012.

Two and a half years in Lebanon

They had of course come across some Iraqi refugees in Syria but had never imagined that they would have to share the same fate one day... They find it difficult to bear their new status: the ongoing threats on the social networks on one hand and the struggle for everyday life and the vulnerability to the mafias who rob refugees of all their belongings on the other. Soon all their savings are gone. The only way out they can think of is to go to Europe by sea or give up altogether and die. Fortunately someone in charge of Iraqi and Syrian refugees at the Fédération Protestante de France manages to get them a visa for France. They had never considered going there and knew very little about it.

Home in Alsace

They leave Lebanon end of August 2015 and are met in France by the Fédération de l’entraide protestante. They choose Alsace to settle down. Because in the pictures they had seen, the pretty and colourful little houses gave such an impression of peace and safety... Their apprehension vanishes when they meet the family that will host them in the village of Obermodern. Uncle Georges and Aunt Eva had responded to the FPF appeal because « God has given us a lot, now it’s time to share ». The family will provide Sandra and Terry with a haven of peace and will help them step by step until they get their resident permits. Much more than a roof over their heads, it will be for them an opportunity of cultural and linguistic immersion, an important stage in their integration in France.

On the professional level, they get help from the TV channel Arte which provides them with the technical means to create their web series « From Damascus to Alsace, logbook of Sandra and Terry, Syrian refugees ».

Many difficulties have certainly been spared to them. Yet to emerge from a painful past towards an uncertain future can’t go without wounds nor suffering...

Covering the Calais Jungle: the other reality

When the director of Arte asked them to do this story, Sandra and Terry had mixed feelings. As a TV presenter and public figure Sandra would probably be recognized by the Syrians. Would they have to face the same dangers as back in Syria in 2012? Threats, violence, rejection? Not at all. It is not enemies they met, but human beings, victims of the same war and who told them what they had gone through: fighting, torture, the loss of loved ones, the journey, the human smugglers. The photos of their families on their smartphones. And the hope to reach the UK. « In the Jungle, there are Christians, and Druze, and Alawites, and Sunnis, but for us it doesn’t make a difference. Here we help each other » Hamdam told them.

The camp itself, the shelters, the rain, the mud, the cold, the garbage: Sandra and Terry would never have been able to imagine them...

ELISABETH MUTSCHLER
Caught in the crossfire

To be a Syrian in Switzerland

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT, SWITZERLAND HAS RECEIVED 13 500 SYRIANS: ONE-THIRD OF THEM IS GRANTED ASYLUM, PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATION, OFTEN WELL TRAINED. MEETING WITH ONE OF THEM, RAED TAWIL AND UPDATE ON THE SITUATION.

Raed Tawil has been in Genova for three and a half years, living in the popular quarter «les Eaux Vives». He is 40 and has worked for 20 years for the Red Crescent, in Damascus, Syria, in charge of the emergency relief. In November 2012, his life dramatically changed: Raed was kidnapped by the governmental forces in the premises of the Red Crescent. He was accused to support the rebels, providing medicines and aid in besieged areas. He has been tortured for 69 days and left for dead. Thanks to Amnesty International involvement he could leave Syria at the beginning of 2013.

His state of health is worrying. The endured torture requires an operation. Turn of events? Raed, who knows a Syrian doctor working in Swiss Hospital of Genova, chose Switzerland rather than Germany «I could come with my wife and my 4 years-old son, that was the most important» Twenty days of hospitalization then six months for reeducation and a psychological follow-up for his traumatic shock, Raed regained his energy and does all he can to find a job again. It is not obvious. «My diplomas are not recognized here and I do not speak French fluently enough to work in the medical field in Switzerland»

Small population

In Switzerland, the number of refugees is low. «An explanation of this, compared to the German numbers, is that we do not have a “Mum Merkel” sums up Stephan Frey, spokesman of OSAR, (Swiss Organization for Refugees Relief). It means that Syrian refugees, when they seek asylum in Switzerland, have more risks to undergo a Dublin decision than in Germany. Moreover, Switzerland grant asylum to one-third, whereas in Germany practically all the refugees grant this protection». If asylum right is sparsely granted in Switzerland, this county at the very beginning, was one of the firsts to implement integration projects for displaced Syrians, in Lebanon, Jordanian and in Turkey. Though, for refugees like Raed in Switzerland, to find a job according to their qualifications is an impossible mission in contrast of others countries where refugees’ professional integration adapts to the requirements of the local market.

Raed sighs: «Today I regret not to be in Germany, but I cannot complain when my family - my father, my mother, my brother and my two sisters - are in Damascus. My father who is 85 never wanted to leave Syria. Except at the beginning of this year when he told me he would do anything to leave Syria...»
In the country, the conditions of life, starting by the very fact to find food, are unbearable. « Raw materials are very expensive Yazan Savoy, a Genevan of Syrian origin, says. The fuel price has raised and all the transports especially those of food products depend on it, the price of a salad can go up 40 €...»

To support about 60 families each year, Yazan Savoy created in 2013 an association called «coup de pouce». A quite significant amount from 450 € to 900 € is given to them to live, for heating and for medical care. « Wealthy individuals began to leave the country. Now it is the turn of people who have nothing left» Yazan reports. He has been living in Switzerland for ten years. In Genova Yazan received his mother, his sister and his brother, thank to family reunification. Only his mother-with his financial support- granted asylum to enjoy her grandchildren and is authorized to come and go from Switzerland. «My brother found a good job Yazan says. But when the conflict will end, he would leave Switzerland to go back to Syria at once. As for my sister, she just got a temporary permit.»

SYLVIANE PITTE'T

Foster families

At the beginning of 2014, OSAR planned a program to host refugees and asylum seekers in foster families in order to allow the asylum seekers easily and rapidly to integrate. It is a family from the Canton of Vaud who received the first refugee in Switzerland in this frame of project. Evi Kassimidis, communication officer at EVAM (Canton of Vaud Institution for Welcoming refugees) notes with satisfaction how the project is developing from April 2016.

«OSAR entrusted us with the mission on the Canton of Vaud. We have 40 involved families and 10 communes which have implemented a support committee. The results are excellent» So, 70 refugees can benefit of a real springboard for integration. «The early days after a refugee’s arrival are the most important. The more the integration slows down, the more it is complicated». It is easy to understand that a stranger to a country and to its way of life will have more assurance if he/she is supported and provided with the foster family advice. Six months hosted in a foster family is enough to continue. As a reminder, Switzerland has 3800 Syrian recognized refugees, 5700 with a temporary permit and 4000 waiting for a decision, for a total of 13500 people.

S.P.
Ahmed, a former ISIS soldier

The history of a wonderful redemption

Back from Syria, he once met Father Akaki Chelidze, in his church of Tbilisi, Georgia. The priest tells this meeting he will not soon forget...

He was a Chenchon back from Syria. For many years, he has been living as a soldier: first, in Russia, during the war with Chechenya, then with ISIS these latest years. It started when Russians killed his brother: according to the custom of Caucasian mountain-dwellers, he had to revenge, but his father, a doctor, told him he did not have permission. To obey his father is more sacred for Caucasian mountain-dwellers than the obligation to take revenge.

But sometimes later, Russians killed his father, so Ahmed went to war... « if you knew what can happen in a war! » he said « Yes, we know, we can see it on the web, I answered, but the most terrible thing is that now, people get used to » Yes, he replied it is horrible and I saw people dying, close to me and in my arms. I know how a human being can die. At the last moment, you have before your eyes a wrecked man, destroyed, lost. I know how one dies.

But when I saw Christian Syrian dying! They were dying and praying and some of them told us they pardoned us! It was not normal, you cannot die such a way, you cannot! I am a Muslim and holy war is for me God’s will. I do it without any remorse, to please God... But dying such a way, no! This raised a question in my heart: something did not work.

But, then the worse came. There was in our group of warriors someone of another ethnicity, someone wild and cruel! During the assault of a village, this man killed Christian children. We, Caucasians, were angry against him, because at war, there are rules and you should not kill children! Three days later this man died in a struggle. Everybody said he has entered heaven for he was killed in jihad. When I heard this, I felt as if an insurmountable hill...
came into myself and a question tortured me. Who is God if He let a man who killed children three days before, enter paradise? I could not escape the question and the interrogation and it was a real inward crisis.

I went on praying and looking for an answer. So, as I was praying my regular prayers on my carpet, instead to call Allah, I said God whoever you are please answer my prayers, what should I do? I got up from my prostration, I saw a white being sending in my heart, light, heat and peace. I do not know how long it lasted, but it remains in me as a meeting, a sign that I should let the war and go to find this being. I did not say anything to the other soldiers. I just said I was tired and wanted to go home. I went back to Georgia and I began to look for this being.

I went to the Orthodox, they were so happy and wanted to baptize me, but I did not look for a baptism, I am a Muslim, I just want an answer to my question. I let them and I went somewhere else. I came to Tbilisi and I come near the churches. I entered in this one because you can see these white things flying, I thought they are like angels. And I felt when coming in that the atmosphere was like in my vision.

As I listened to Ahmed, I was paralyzed and I could not say anything. It is true that when you begin to look for God it means that you have already find him. The first thing I wanted to tell him is that when a Christian take the weapons to be violent on behalf of his God he stops being a Christian. He agreed with me, but for me it was important to explain to him that it was the same thing for a Muslim. He was not convinced but what was important was that, at that moment his conscience was not destroyed and that the way of God’s voice in him was not closed.

I added: « Dear Ahmed, you must rejoice, you are suffering, this means that you are alive. In this light, you found peace, the face of God’s son, of this God, our eternal Father, but also this Father in love in the unity of the Spirit. If one day you will be baptized it will be because you believe that the Most High God is also a Father full of love who rejoices of your joys and who feels concerned with your troubles, who suffers your sufferings more than yourself and whom you can trust and will never deceive you because he wants your happiness more than yourself.»

«So, this is the way?» he asked, amazed
During two hours, we have found the time and willing to ask questions about this God, one and only God according to the Coran, but not at all alone. « If God exists and we have the opportunity to talk to him, it is because he has forever he ability of entering into dialogue. The most important for us is to make the necessary step. You should see in all those you closed the eyes, a choir of friends who pray for you. And to do so, you must look at each of them in the eyes. If not, they will remain enemies for you.»

He understood what I said since at the end of our conversation, his face became less hard.
«I know quite well, dear Ahmed, that you will meet God, it will be where, when and how He wills. This church is opened for you and you can come whenever you want. You will not be deceived as long as you keep in you, faith in God who found you, hope he wants for us not to be slaves and love he put in our hearts, filial love, love towards men, our brothers, because God wants his sons to be free to love.»

FATHER AKAKI CHELIDZE
With Anie Boudjikanian, Beirut

«The worse thing is that now people get used to the war and though it is terrible.»
In Hanna’s eyes, exile, I see signs of violence written in flesh and blood. They reveal our tragic fate in all our inhumanity. Everywhere I see a disastrous chaos. And in the same time, I see a divine intervention. I see this as God saying: «Let there be light!»

In our quarter of Aleppo, when in one single day there are 37 rockets sent by numerous terrorists, coming from all around the world, who claim to be fighting for the destruction of our infidel state, in order to establish an Islamic state, I wonder whose side is our way? Is it the right direction for us who are following the crucified? I fear that it is not the case. We are expected much more.

At the beginning, there is no other way except the revelation of the Cross.

Rev. Bchara Moussa Oghli
Aleppo
with Albert Huber