

Letter to our Marist friends

It is now 10 weeks since war began in Aleppo ; It has been called «the decisive battle » : whichever of the 2 camps which wins will rule Syria. Decisive, it is : by the extent of the destruction, the fires, the human dramas, the deaths of innocents and the number of refugees ; and it is not finished, the various « actors » having, it seems to us, opted for the worsening of the situation which will lead to further destruction and death. Despite the fierce fighting, the bombardments, the mortar rounds, the booby-trapped vehicles and the lightning attacks of the rebels, the situation on the ground has scarcely changed, Aleppo being still cut in half with a fluid front line changing every day.

Because of the fighting, hundreds of thousands of people have left their often very modest dwellings, abandoning their meagre possessions, fleeing the dangerous zones and wandering the streets in search of shelter. The public gardens and the schools are their refuges. The authorities have opened 90 schools to house the refugees but providing them only with a roof and leaving the rest to the NGOs.

Our group, the Marist blues, is composed of about 50 persons, mainly youth. We have taken charge of 4 neighbouring schools in the popular quarter of Aleppo that the Christians call "Djabal Al Sayde" (the hill of Our Lady) and the Moslem Cheikh Maksoud. Nearly 1200 displaced persons are crowded there, especially families with 4 to 8 children each, all Moslem, Syrians certainly but of different ethnic groups: there are Arabs, Turkomans, Kurds and many Kourbates (Romanians). Our activities take place on many levels:

- First, to assure lodging: mattress, towels, drinking water..
- Then food: the 3 meals for the adults and young people, milk for the babies...
- Then hygiene: sanitary installations, cleanliness of the places, the toilets ; distribution of soap, detergents, nappies ...
- Then health: we have opened a medical post with young doctors who are rostered to care for the sick and especially supply them with free medicines
- It must not be forgotten that these people have left their homes with only the clothes they were wearing. We try to provide them with clothing, especially for the babies and the children.
- Finally, we concern ourselves with the children. We try to make them forget the war and their misery. 25 young Marist blues take turns morning and afternoon to get them to play, distract them, and fill the very long times with educational activities.

The quarter of Djabal Al Saydé was the most secure, because the most northern in Aleppo (the battles have taken place mostly in the eastern and southern quarters of the city). But last week, two events shook the quarter : on Friday 28 September, the rebels made an incursion of several hours, quickly repelled by the regular army but leaving many dead on the ground and the refugees very disturbed. Then on Sunday 30 September, several mortar shells fell some metres from the schools causing a lot of material damage but fortunately few casualties. Some refugee families fled to other calmer places (for some, it was the 3rd or 4th move) and they were quickly replaced in the schools by new arrivals. And many Christian families who live in the area have fled and come to take refuge with

the Marists thus joining other poor families from Midane who had found refuge with the Brothers two weeks ago.

For two and a half months, « the Marist blues » have continued (it has to be said in all humility : with great courage and much bravery) their commitment to the refugees, and recently we have undertaken a new project for the young and not so young displaced « I want to learn » ; Br Georges Sabe has presented it on the Facebook page of Maristes-Alep : « I want to learn, I love to learn! We have listened with our heart! Big and small, we have asked for a pencil, an exercise book for writing in, for learning! Five times five! How to write one, two, three, four, five? I dare you to look at what I am writing, they are words of hope, of love, of thanks, of confidence and faith. I will exist because of your regard, your tender, loving regard. For them all, adults and children, we are launching our new project: I WANT TO LEARN. Their schools have not opened their doors, we offer them our hearts, so that they can write in their own hand a new page in their lives, a life which will vanquish hate and violence, a life a hymn of love that will never end! »

Six weeks ago, we were faced with a « revolt » of Christian families not displaced living in the same quarter as the displaced and who no longer had the means of survival : minor employees or officials, whose salary (before the events) just sufficed for them to live « poorly » and who no longer had the money (because they were no longer paid) to buy even bread, when it was available. We took the initiative of a new project « Sallet Al Djabal =the Mountain basket » which consists of providing a basket (big enough to nourish a family) of foodstuffs a month to 290 Christian families to satisfy their hunger, and this in collaboration with some bishops and Caritas-Syria. We distributed the first basket on 9 September and the second will be for 7 October. We try in the measure of our means to provide them with a minimum (but truly a minimum) vital for survival. Unfortunately, the needs are immense and our resources insufficient.

All we are doing would be impossible without the generous support of benefactors who, from abroad, show us their solidarity by sending us gifts. To you all, we wish to say many thanks. We want to assure you that all your gifts reach us immediately and intact. With the money available we buy on place everything necessary and we do not spend a penny on administrative or operational costs. Everything collected goes to the beneficiaries. Our work relies on total voluntary service. As for the products distributed, we find them on site ; not everything is available all the time but the shopkeepers find a way sometimes of getting to their warehouses situated in the dangerous zones by paying « a ransom » or by bringing in products from other Syrian towns by paying « rights of passage » to the rebels, who will confiscate them if they do not .

In closing, we would like to share this with you:

"In the hollow of your lives, the Lord lays hope. In the hollow of your hands, the Lord lays his love. In the depth of your eyes, the Lord lays his light. In the depth of your hearts, the Lord lays his peace"

Nabil Antaki

On behalf of « The Marist Blues »