

## Syria: mirror of humanity

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### Introduction

At the beginning of my lecture here in Amsterdam, for me it is the first time in the Netherlands, I have to mention the many Dutch Jesuits that over a period of more than sixty years have contributed so much to the promotion of human and Christian life in several countries of the Middle East, especially Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. Among the about 30 Dutch Jesuits that I have known more or less closely, I will pay attention for a moment especially to two persons who have devoted almost their entire religious lives to the service of the Church of Syria, namely Father Michael Brenninkmeijer and Father Frans van der Lugt. And I have to mention also a third Jesuit, a figure universal as well as Armenian, that of Father Peter Hans Kolvenbach, Provincial of the Jesuits of the Near East and General of the Society of Jesus.

1) Father Frans van der Lugt, who died as a martyr in Homs five years ago.

Everybody loved Father Frans, Christians and Muslims. He himself taught Syrians to know and to love their country. This love of the country is necessary also today. Father Frans is the brave figure of a prophet and an apostle of Jesus Christ, sometimes until provocation!

2) Father Michael Brenninkmeijer, who also deceased in 2014.

He is a model of inculturation, of respect for people and of the humility that evangelizes without limits. In the image of the Son of God, *“as rich as he was, he became poor in everything...”*.

3) Father Peter Hans Kolvenbach

The martyred Armenian Church was his choice of inculturation, following Christ. A man of science and total poverty; he was chosen by the Society of Jesus to lead it at critical moments in its history.

## I The violence of the war, its effects after 8 years of conflict

I come from Syria, cradle of Christianity, where, at the gates of Damascus, the apostle Paul met Christ and received the baptism from the hands of Ananias.

I come from Syria where, at Antioch and at the dawn of the proclamation of the Gospel, the first believers received the name of “Christians”. I come from Syria where a beautiful mosaic of churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant), liturgical rites (Armenian, Byzantine, Syriac, Chaldean, Latin) of different theological and ethnic traditions, live together and are proud to witness to their faith in the midst of a Muslim majority and a tested people.

I come from Syria where the war, after 8 years, has made millions of victims. On a population of 23 million We can count:

5 million refugees in neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan).

7 million displaced people in the country.

2 million children that are not going to school.

2 million people having emigrated to the West.

More than half a million people were killed.

Thousands of people have been mutilated.

Therefore I am grateful that I can share with you on this occasion the concerns and hope of a pastor who lives in Aleppo in Syria, a region that has been tormented and is suffering so much.

What has been happening in Syria for more than eight years has all the characteristics of chaos: destruction, confusion, mystification of reality. The list can be much longer, with the denial of human dignity, suffering and violence of all kinds, moral and economic corruption... I could go on, but I think everyone can be aware of the negative effects of war.

I will focus on the analysis of the reasons for this war. I think it can help us not only to better understand the situation in Syria and in the Middle East in general, but also to recognize certain dynamics common to almost all Western countries.

In this conflict we can find motives that we could describe as local, others that are more at a regional level and beyond that motives that only can be explained by international political strategies.

Let me start with the regional level:

We talk about the tension and the various conflicts in the Middle East generated by the internal struggle between Sunnites and Shiites, within Islam, which highlights the political antagonism between Iran (Shiite) and Saudi Arabia (Sunni). These conflicts are maintained by the economic support to armed groups who strive for an Islamic hegemony. It is a neuralgic point that has characterized the entire history of Islam from the succession of Mohammed. Today it is exploited and used in a particular way with objectives that are political and economic, but certainly not just religious.

In my opinion, one of Islam's challenges is to free itself from political exploitation, a challenge that coincides with the confrontation with modernity and its provocations, which seem to profoundly undermine Islamic religious structure.

Then the international level:

A second, probably predominant, element is certainly the economic and strategic element pursued by the world powers (Russia and the United States) and their allies. There is no doubt that the oil and gas reserves of the Middle East are resources that everyone would like to control. It is needless to point out their involvement in the war in Syria with funding, the supply of weapons and military forces equipped with first-quality weaponry. The pretext is that of democracy and the protection of human rights, but what the Syrians have seen are economic maneuvers and military bases to preserve and maintain the various interests.

The third level is the local level:

In Syria itself, where the war happens, there are different internal dynamics that made the destructive action of regional and international dynamics possible. From our point of view, as Syrians and as Christians, these internal dynamics consist of the religious aspect (struggle between Sunnites and Shiites-Alawites – relations between Christians and Muslims) and the economic aspect (recruitment of mercenaries, financing and exploiting extremist political and religious groups). This is the dynamic at work in Syria: a

powerful country, able to withstand the great destructive pressure underway, and at the same time fragile, torn apart by various parties involved:

- Sunnites, Shiites, Alawites, Ishmaelites, Druzes, Kurds, Circassians (Chechen Muslims).
- (Byzantine, Syrian, Armenian) Orthodox and (Byzantine, Syrian, Armenian, Latin, Chaldean and Maronite) Catholic Christians
- The military regime, the ruling party in power, corruption
- The armed groups of Islamic extremists who have tried to bring the conflict to an exclusively religious level; fortunately, the plan failed because the government and the vast majority of the population did not fall into the trap.

The effects of all this are visible and documented:

- The main Syrian cities have been almost completely destroyed by bombing: more than 60% of the buildings in Aleppo and more than 70% in Homs (the second and third largest cities of Syria)
- The destruction of five cathedrals in Aleppo (Armenian-Catholic and Armenian-Orthodox, Maronite, Greek-Catholic and Syrian Catholic) as well as other ancient churches;
- The destruction of the largest mosque in Aleppo and the oldest in Syria, as well as other mosques.
- The destruction of 35 Assyrian-Chaldean villages in the northeast of the country near the border with Iraq, plus Iraqi villages in the Nineveh Plain, destroyed before, during the war in Iraq.
- Attacks on traditional Christian places (Maaloula, Saydnaya etc.) where the Aramaic language is still spoken; for those who do not know, this is the language spoken by Jesus.
- The destruction of archaeological sites such as Palmyra, Deir ez-Zor, Mar Semaan (Saint Simeon), Raqqa.
- The abduction of two Orthodox bishops; the assassination of several priests and two imams who disagreed with the violence of extremists; as well as the assassination of the son of the Mufti of Syria, because of his support for the Syrian government.

Furthermore, we must consider as a consequence of the war: the weakening of the Syrian social fabric in all its aspects, a strong migration due to a lack of security and fear, especially for Christians exposed to a growing number of armed groups “in the name of Islam”; families separated from their children who left the country because of military service; economic and above all moral corruption due to the growth of poverty in general, the Western economic embargo and the difficulty to find a way to lead a decent life and the growth of begging, especially among children, which was a phenomenon virtually unknown before the war.

## **II From violence to hope, the only possible way: charity**

Regarding this point, as a Christian, I can only see a glimpse of the ways of hope that were opened thanks to the witness of Christian charity of many believers from all the Christian Churches in Syria, helped by the support of the international Christian community. All aid has been provided in the service of the most vulnerable of the population: displaced persons, children, elderly, the new poor.

Caritas, JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service), GOPA (Caritas of the Orthodox Churches) are the main Christian charity organisations, if we take into account the impossibility of the presence of international NGO's (regrettably, these are increasingly politicized) in the territory under the control of the present government. These organisations carry out the work of true humanitarian associations, responding to the needs of the whole population, without any ethnic or religious distinction, through projects of material aid, food distribution, medical services, education, psychological support, vocational training for young people (Christians and Muslims). There are also housing reconstruction projects and aid projects for the elderly. I refer to a project that came up in our Chaldean Church in Aleppo and was realized in cooperation with the Florence Catholic Association (AGATA-SMERALDA). Some places were also developed to accommodate single elderly people, to give them the possibility to meet with others and to face the fatigue of the years of war through a meeting place.

In addition to these main organisations, we also have:

- The Christian Charity Committee;
- 17 groups of Scouts only in Aleppo for the gathering of young people;

- The Community of Christian Life (CVX), the teams of Notre Dame, Franciscan, Salesian and Marist groups.

We also have lay associations in the health sector, particularly focused on helping families of migrants and their relatives and on solidarity between neighbors.

All these manifestations that we are witnessing, appear to us as a true miracle of transformation and openness:

- For Christians: a new awareness of their presence in Syria; before they lived in a closed circle – although part of Syria – and always on the defensive. At present, although Christians are becoming smaller and smaller in number, they are more significantly engaged in the process of the country's rebirth; the crisis of the war led Christians of different denominations to build a single community to find the strength to survive, to have a new look at Muslims and to become less suspicious and more free from confessionalism, especially in their working place. Both professionally and through charitable work many Christians have started to establish relations of solidarity and proximity with many Muslims for the first time. In Aleppo, for example, through medical visits to families and elderly people in need, and through the establishment of partnerships with Caritas, JRS and GOPA teams and Muslim groups for the realization of school and medical projects. The teams work in East-Aleppo, which is entirely Muslim. Some young Muslims are added to these teams (i.e. the experience of two youngsters working for the team of "Al Ard hamra"). These are acts of new courage for Christians, especially for those in Aleppo, who by their attitude demonstrated a certain social and cultural superiority towards Muslims.
- For the Muslims: We are witnessing a transformation in the way they view Christians. If armed Islamist extremist groups have not managed to gain the upper hand over the Islamic community, it is also because a majority of Muslims considered all these abuses unjust. The hatred and violence toward Christians of these so-called defenders of true Islam and the testimonies of solidarity and charity given by Christians have, in some way, been unexpected for Muslims. If previously they regarded Christians as a bit snobbish reality to be tolerated but

not deserving respect, now we find much more consideration and recognition.

From my personal experience I can say that many of them have been touched in their hearts. That is probably the real miracle, and the fact that this is taking place at the most critical moment for Syria. And we may well say, paraphrasing Jacques Bossuet: *“God writes right, even with curved lines”*.

On this path of hope we can also mention solidarity initiatives coming from outside of Syria: many initiatives of prayer, solidarity, fundraising campaigns in many parishes, dioceses and ecclesial associations, that make us feel that we are not forgotten but that we are part of a great community whose borders do not coincide with those of nations. In the first place the excellent work coordinated by Caritas Internationalis, which involves the national Caritas organisations in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. Most of the projects in Syria were supported and funded through the channels of Caritas and JRS.

But also the initiative of the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, Cardinal Mario Zenari has to be mentioned. Thanks to contacts and collaboration with the International Volunteer Association (AVSI) he promoted the opening of three Catholic hospitals, two in Damascus and one in Aleppo, open to all people regardless of their political or religious affiliation. In a country in great distress because of the embargo, the high costs of medical care and medicine and the emigration of medical staff, this aid is a real light in the darkness.

### **III The future of the country and the Christians in Syria**

One of the first things I had to face when I was invited to give lectures in Europe is the classical misunderstanding due to the superficial knowledge of the reality of the Middle East: the Middle East is Arab and Muslim. I will elaborate this initial misunderstanding, because it lead to gross mistakes. It is true that we speak Arabic and that Arab culture has a strong influence. But that said, in the Middle East, not all Arabs are Arabs, and in any case Arabs are not all Muslims. I say this because it has to do with the biggest challenge we face today, not only in Syria, but perhaps in the entire world. The answer we give and how we treat this question will probably be decisive for the future of the

entire world. It was not by coincidence that pope Francis repeated on several occasions that in Syria a real world war is taking place on the territory of a single nation.

Just try to imagine the point at which a consistent strategy will have transformed this conflict into a truly religious conflict, both within Islam and between Muslims and Christians. It would have catastrophic consequences, first in the countries with a Muslim majority, but then also in those with a Christian majority, not to mention Judaism in Israel. It is a strategy that can bring many advantages to those who want to defend and promote their interests and it is pursued today. Therefore it is necessary to be constantly attentive not to fall into this temptation, but rather to create situations and opportunities for dialogue and peace.

One of the duties that I feel as a bishop of the Chaldean minority in Syria is to develop two ideas that are dear to me and that are rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The first follows from the suggestion made by the Council to all members of the Church to think that their presence in the Muslim world is a dynamic of communion, first between Christians themselves, then between Christians and Muslims.

In the first place, then, the expression "together, becoming Christians" can guide us in ecumenical dialogue that seeks unity in the following of Christ, to be disciples sent to the world as apostles to proclaim the good news of the Gospel: "*You are the beloved of God, do not be afraid*".

Secondly, with different groups of Muslims, I wish to deepen the expression "together, becoming citizens", a difficult task, but one that Christians in the Middle East want to promote in the hope of more religious freedom and more respect for differences.

On these two levels of common life, I must say, that in this Syria, so much affected by violence, Christians have been able to give a remarkable example of solidarity and service to the poor without discrimination. This has attracted the attention and questions from Muslims about the Christian faith.

I could quote dozens of testimonies of gratitude from Muslims, especially from those who have been helped with medical and surgical operations, but as an example I will confine myself to one testimony which particularly touched me.



A poor old Muslim crouched against the wall of the Chaldean church where the Syrian office of Caritas is located. While he was waiting for a bag of food, he saw me pass with the cassock and the episcopal cross around my neck. At once he stood up and in front of the people lining up, all Muslims, he spoke aloud: *“Now we know who the Christians are! It’s pure gold, no fake!”*

For me, it was like a prophetic gesture, which remains in my heart and consciousness. A sign of indelible hope for Christians, a sign of hope in a hell of violence.

#### IV The consequences of war on families

If the war has consequences on the social fabric, then this concerns the families in the first place. We will analyse this in a simple way.

- 1) First of all, we have to underline that the family dimension is really a keystone of the Syrian society. For the individual the family is always the point of reference. And when the direct family (parents) is not present, we see that it is replaced by the closest relatives: uncles, aunts, grandparents, etc.

We insist on this aspect, because as far as the social structure of Syria is not completely destroyed after eight years of war, it is thanks to the solidity of family ties.

- 2) For this reason we can say that the family is seen as a sacred place where the generosity and blessing of God are being revealed. It may be that the tribal imprint of Syrian society is at the root of this perception of the family, but it is unthinkable to argue that this primitive and negative element of tribalism must be eliminated in order for the country to enter modernity. It’s precisely the family dimension that also reveals it is possible to live modern progress, since Syria, in different aspects, is already a modern country, that will not give up her own identity, nor certain values with a profound meaning for humanity. These values are not only Christian, but are rooted in the spirit of fraternity, of a life of real communion, a solidarity towards the weakest and in relations of reciprocity and gratuity.

- 3) So there is a solidness of family life which means that we cannot be completely abandoned to ourselves. The family prevents individualist alienation, which seems to characterize European societies more and more.

This value means that despite the war and the dispersion of families around the world, solidarity is maintained between all. The children abroad seek to support their parents back home, despite the difficulties they themselves have to deal with. Parents, on their part, help their children to build a future, even in a far-away country. Despite the separation, the family ties remain strong!

- 4) One of the consequences of this war on families, Christian or Muslim, is the tearing apart of the social structure, that seriously hinders the possibility of a reconstruction of the future.

Many young people, especially young girls, are suffering from the current impossibility to start a family. It is felt as a personal failure, as an inability to realize oneself as a person. These young people have the impression that they have failed their vocation which should have given them confidence in the future and in themselves.

One of the risks of the country's situation is our inability to resist destruction. This can further weaken the family fabric. Syria has been weakened a lot because of the migration of young people, the rich and the most talented of the country.

- 5) Therefore, we should pay more attention to families, because they are the indispensable foundation for the development and growth of society, despite all the difficulties that there are to effectively support the families in this globalized world. Today's Syria exactly seems to put the spotlight on the limits and contradictions of today's world.

Finally, we need serious reflection in Syria on projects that can support families and especially young people so that new homes can emerge that can contribute to the maintenance of the Syrian and especially Christian social fabric.

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