

Press release no. 56

36th EDITION

MEETING FOR THE FRIENDSHIP AMONGST THE PEOPLES

#meeting15

August 20th-26th Rimini Fiera

A reason to live and to die for: the martyrs of today

Rimini, August 23rd 2015 – Father Douglas Al Bazi, priest of the parish of Mar Eillia in Erbil (Iraq), and Father Ibrahim Alsabagh, pastor of the community of Aleppo in Syria, told their stories of martyrdom – not only personal, but of entire peoples, for their faith in Christ. He introduced the meeting Father Stefano Alberto, professor of theology at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. He explained how, in the very land where God, by calling Abraham, aroused the conscience of a man by letting him call His name, a blind violence of fanaticism arose. “We are not interested here in historical and political considerations” father Alberto added, “as what they say to our lives as Christians in the West the terrible trials of the Christians of Syria and Iraq. And, above all, why does nobody forswears? I speak of those forced to leave their land and of those who remain as well”.

Douglas began by recalling that until 2003 in Iraq there were about two million Christians; today, there are only about 200 thousand. “I was born in this country” he says “and I have Muslim friends, we Christians are the salt of this country. Moreover, we are the better educated segment of the population”. Father Douglas was kidnapped and tortured for nine days in 2007, but he doesn’t consider himself as a hero. “I broke his nose, hit with a hammer in his mouth and on his shoulder and a disc of the spine. For four days I was left without water. They kept up the television volume not to be heard, and hit me every night. Then they left me chained with a padlock. Of this chain” he continued “they are left ten rings that I used as a Rosary and the lock for the Our Father. There were also moments of calm, when the same people who used to beat me in the evening asked me how to handle their wives, and I replied to be nice to them”.

Then the priest asked a question to all the assembled: “Do I look scared? The same thing can be said of my people. Jesus told us to carry his cross, but the important thing is not to follow, challenge, engage. If we will be beaten the Middle East, our last words will be ‘Jesus saved us’. What I ask you is to be our voice. Pray for my people, and help saving my people”. Father Douglas confesses his fear to be killed sooner or later. “But I’m not worried so much for me” he said “as for my people”.

Such a long and passionate testimony from father Ibrahim, who on more than one point has almost cried. The priest began by drawing a picture of the situation in Aleppo: “We live precariously: shortage of food resources and water; we are under bombardment and disease spreads. They come to ask water in the convent. We try to see in this people all the signs of the Spirit by sharing this need and a thousand other problems, and opening up to everyone – Christians and Muslims – the doors of the convent. One day I was carrying some sacks and a man warned me: ‘Father, you are dirtying the dress’. I replied: ‘It is made to get dirty, because this a priest’s vocation’”.

A woman – tells the Franciscan – confessed her discomfort because with so many Christians fled, the faces of the neighborhood were completely changed and she felt disoriented. “Was it not the Lord” he replied “who wants to change the people around us, so the aroma of Christ come to them? It is not a hardship, but a task that the Lord has entrusted to us”.

The story continues, it is almost a daily news. “One day” says Father Ibrahim, “a Muslim comes and says, ‘By looking at how people come to get water, no quarrels, no screaming, I astonish. Elsewhere there is hitting and screaming. You are different’. To be there as Christians, in this boiling pot, Syria and throughout the Middle East, is very important to give the salt, the flavor to what bubbles in this pot. Many dream of escape, it is normal – they are afraid. But many of us Christians are convinced that the Lord, in the days of Saint Paul already, has planted the tree of life in the Middle East. We do not want to take away this tree”. They will not leave the Franciscans from Aleppo. “We love more, forgive more, but don’t leave.”

Paradoxically, in such a tragic situation the miracle can become a daily experience. "Even the daily Mass without interruption is a miracle. With such a lack, not only of water but all the basic necessities, we are increasingly filled with gratitude to God who gives us much. Feel this lack has made us realer, careful for our Muslim brothers".

Not foreseen in the program, it has added a third contribution to the cooperator AVSI James Fjords, who presented a video he made, a dialogue with the family of Myriam, the Iraqi girl of Qaraqosh that had already recounted his experience on TV Sat7 and who now lives with her parents in the mall Ainkawadi of Erbil, which has become a refugee camp. Very moving one of the interventions of Alis, Myriam's mother: "If it was all in my hands, I would not be able to forgive. But what I live is that the Jesus' desire is giving grace to mankind to learn to forgive each other. It is only through God that we can learn to forgive – forgive because it is a grace that we receive from Him: it is not a human ability". Forgiving others is difficult, confessed banks, but it is not impossible. "And especially when you forgive others, you receive great peace. Try peace allows you to get ahead in life. "

(A.Cap.)

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