

AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED

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Introduction:

I wish to thank the Church in Germany, and in particular *Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)* for its commitment on behalf of the Christians of the East. For in fact, for several decades now ACN has been unceasing, not only in giving financial aid, but also in alerting international opinion to the situation of the persecuted Christians throughout the world, and today above all in the Middle East. Thanks to the hard work of this Catholic charity, some well-documented televised commentaries have been made, informing people about the persecution of Christians, which has become an everyday matter in many regions on our planet.

In addition to this I would like to draw your attention to the general attitude of the Christian leaders in the Middle East on the subject of such persecution. As a rule, we prefer not to emphasize all those things that could be construed as a form of persecution, disparagement or exclusion. We seek peace, and as Christians we strive by every possible means to promote peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and above all an attitude of genuine citizenship. But sadly, the devastating storms that have soaked our countries in blood are discouraging us and plunging us into dismay! What are we to do, if we are to continue to exist as living and coherent Christian communities? This is the crucial question that all the Christians here are asking themselves, starting with the patriarchs and the bishops.



Part one: Aid to the Church in Need

I have noticed, in working with the representatives of ACN, how carefully this organization pays attention to the deepening of the Christian life of those whom it helps. Even for those Christians who have been uprooted and are in difficulty, ACN seeks – beyond the necessary material aid – to care for people's souls, to help them to pray, to deepen their faith, even in the midst of the difficulties they face. I consider this aspect to be a special charism of your charity, which never forgets the source of all these gifts that have been shared. A prayer, taken from the Oriental liturgy, states: *"For every donation and every perfect gift comes down from heaven, from you, oh Father of Light"* (cf also Jas 1:17).



In Syria, generally speaking, all of the dioceses are being helped by ACN, and especially in this time of war and economic crisis. I personally follow all the programs in aid of the families who have become victims of war:

1). A program helping families to rebuild their ruined homes, with aid varying between 500 and 1000 Euros in each case. (\$650 and \$1,297 respectively).

2). Medical assistance for those injured in the war, the victims of shelling and mortar fire. Fortunately, more recently, there have been fewer mortars falling in the Christian quarters.

3). Aid for food, schooling and medical supplies for the Chaldean Christians in the region of Jaziré : Hassaké, Kamichli and Malkié, where we have three large Chaldean parishes.

With Sister Annie, of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, an aid program on behalf of 1,000 or so Christian families has been established in Aleppo and in Hassaké, including children's clothing, help with rent and food aid.

All these programs have been carried out through the intermediary of Father André Halemba, who is closely following the needs of the people in Syria, and especially in Aleppo.

I wish to thank you above all for your prayers, your readiness to help and above all for your generosity. We also pray for our benefactors, for their discreet but effective kindness.

Part two : Mosul

In speaking to you here of your communion with the persecuted Christians, I would like to tell you about the two cities that have been much spoken about today, namely Mosul and Aleppo.

Mosul is the cradle of Christianity in Mesopotamia and has been the seat of the Chaldean patriarchate for many centuries. It is the great northern metropolis of Iraq, the seat of a number of Catholic and Orthodox dioceses. It is the capital of the Plain of Niniveh, which is peopled by dozens of Christian villages – Chaldeans, Assyrians and Syriacs, both Catholic and Orthodox.

Mosul is likewise the living memory of the Christians of Iraq; it is the city of the ancient churches and ancient dioceses, the city surrounded by ancient monasteries – Saint Matthew, Saint Behnam, St George, St Hormisdas, not forgetting the monastery of the Dominicans for the past quarter of a century. When the Christians visit these holy places, it is as though they were making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I have been familiar with Mosul, with its seminaries, its theology faculties, its richly robed bishops, the guardians of a rich patrimony – ranging from ancient manuscripts to artistic murals and icons.



All this history, all this rich patrimony which was the pride of the Christians of Mosul and of Iraq, has now simply vanished. In the blinking of an eye the Islamist groups have invaded the city, expelling the Christians, requisitioning their homes and destroying their churches and episcopal sees. That is what has happened to the Christians of Mosul and the Plain of Niniveh! Is this a persecution against the Christians, or is it rather part of a policy serving worldwide economic and strategic interests? In politics the truth often has to be dissimulated for the sake of gain... For they hope to gain more by sacrificing the poorest, the most defenseless, in the face of men trained to steal and destroy...

It seems to me that the mission of these Islamist groups is to steal, to kill, to terrorize and destroy. In the first instance it is a matter of satisfying primary instincts that have been repressed by our consumer societies and threatened by the phenomenon of globalization. It is a destructive machine, which satisfies the instincts of people who have rebelled, on principle, against everything represented by modernity – the Christians, the West, the minorities, etc. But at the same time this state of mind is exploited for a political goal, which aims to divide countries in order to be able to achieve a stronger political and economic hegemony.

Our Patriarch Louis-Raphaël I Sako, has on several occasions spoken openly of a *diabolical conspiracy*. Pope Francis continues to express his closeness with us. He is aware of the economic interests and the arms trafficking that are promoting these interminable wars in the Middle East. Let us hope that the words he addressed a year ago to the patriarchs of the Catholic Churches of the East: "*We cannot imagine a Middle East without the presence of the Christians*" will alert the international community to the importance of the Christian presence in our region!

Part three: Aleppo

After more than three years of war in Syria, the majority of Christians, particularly those in Damascus and Aleppo, have continued to endure all the economic and security difficulties, while hoping for better days. They were convinced that, thanks to the official army, the armed Islamist groups would soon be defeated and that the order of the state would win the battle. Now what has happened in Mosul at the beginning of August has been something like the last straw for the majority of Christians in Syria, like the crossing of a demarcation line that was protecting them! In fact, and because of the situation in Mosul, the Christians of Syria have been plunged into desolation and fear and are now rushing to emigrate. All those who can escape, and above all the young, are not hesitating to take all kinds of risks in order to leave Syria. At present, in Aleppo, we are living under the spectre of the arrival of these Islamist groups of ISIS, or ISIL (the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", or "*Da'ech*" in Arabic) and people are in constant fear of having to undergo the same fate as their brothers in Mosul and in the Plain of Niniveh.

Aleppo, where the Christians felt entirely at home, proud of their faith, of their history, of their liturgies, of their hierarchies, of their manner of living in dignity and fraternally with their Muslim neighbors, everyone is now in despair and desolation. The rich have already left; the middle classes have become impoverished, the poor have become destitute. Little by little, there will soon be no one left in Aleppo except the elderly and the poorest of the poor! There is an international war machine that has fallen upon their country and upon them, a minority and defenseless group. They are being forced to choose emigration, which is undoubtedly a huge loss for them, for their country and for the Church, but which is perhaps a major service rendered to the superpowers who are thirsting for domination and the fulfilment of their strategic plans!


