

MARIST BLUES

Letter from Aleppo N° 14

A precarious status quo has been reigning in Aleppo for some weeks, concomitantly with the decision to suspend the air strikes that were going to be inflicted on us to "punish" the regime for using chemical weapons. To wish to "punish" the regime by killing young conscripts (finding themselves on the chosen sites) or civilians (by the so-called intelligent bombs which often miss their targets, as we have seen elsewhere) and by bombarding an infrastructure already largely destroyed by two and a half years of war! What stupidity. The people of Aleppo have found this farce grotesque and, in other circumstances, would have laughed at it. As if the Syrian crisis had begun with the chemical weapons and would end with their destruction. Luckily, the agreement, which has allowed the Western warmongers to save face, appears to be the beginnings of a process of nego-



tiated peace. Since this agreement, there has been almost no military action in the city, except for the continuing but distant noise of gunfire from one part and the battles in the countryside between the armed rebel bands, the most extremist Islamic group getting the upper hand and executing the leaders of the FSA.

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

The meeting of provincial bursars with Br Victor Preciado, General Bursar, in the General House, ended on 15 October. Br Chris Wills, of the Secretariat of Collaboration for Mission International, met with volunteers in Germany from 11 to 11 October.

Br Javier Espinosa of the Secretariat of the Laity held a "brothers-laity communion" workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, from 15 to 20 October.

Br Ernesto Sanchez C.G. was at the meeting of the Superiors of the Province of Mediterranea in Guadamar, Spain, from 17 to 20 October.

Br Michael de Waas C.G. took part in the meeting of the Provincial Council of South Asia from 18 to 20 October.

Br Antonio Ramalho C.G. is at the Southern Africa Provincial Chapter from 20 to 23 October.

As for everyday life in Aleppo, it is less difficult than before. There is still rationing of water, electricity and bread, but it seems that the people are used to this state and have organized their lives accordingly. The displaced who had taken refuge in the schools have been evacuated, and the schools have opened their doors. As for the blockade which has now lasted 3 months, it has become less painful thanks to a new profession: the "maabarji" = the one who crosses the maabar or the check point between the 2 zones. The rebels, who imposed the blockade, allow pedestrians to pass (by thousands every day and in both directions). They let them bring with them as many little black plastic bags as their 2 hands can carry (lorries carrying merchandise are forbidden to enter). So one person returns with a bag of 1 kg of tomatoes, another of cucumbers, a 3rd of raisins, etc. Once in Aleppo, the maabarji gives his bags to an associate and goes back to return with other bags. And a 1 kg plus 1 kg can make dozens of kilos, all the pavements of Aleppo are invaded by

the stalls of the merchants, provisioned by the maabarjis, who sell their products at exorbitant prices considering the number of middlemen and the bakchich one has to pay those who guard the check point. Supplying has become, for the armed bands, a very lucrative business. But the 2 million Aleppans, already very impoverished by the war, pay for produce 5 times more expensive than on the other side of the maabar. The majority of inhabitants go on foot. The circulation of vehicles is very difficult seeing that the pavements have been invaded by the merchants, the roadways by the pedestrians, and the vehicles slalom between them.

Petrol, fuel and flour are always denied passage. I have been able to fill the tank of our generator with 1000 litres of fuel which the maabarji has brought through, in many crossings, in 100 transparent plastic bags of 10 litres each, passing them off as vinegar!! We were without telephone for 3 weeks and have been without internet for 6 weeks. With the blockade of persons in force for 45 days, no one can enter or leave Aleppo without risking his life. We have been promised an improvement with the opening of a new route which will bypass the zones held by the rebels and which will allow the delivery of what is lacking and the travel of habitants.



Our activities, with the Marist Blues and the Oeille de Dieu continue very well. We decided, at the beginning of September, to lodge in the town the families displaced from Djabal Al Sayde who had taken refuge with us on fleeing their quarter invaded by the rebels on Good Friday. And this for 2 reasons: we thought it was time for these people to live in family, after they had been lodging with us for 5 months in separate dormitories, and then, since the Marists' house was distant from their children's schools, we judged it preferable, with the beginning of the school year, that they live near the schools, the school bus service no longer in existence. We paid the rental for them (for 6

months) of little (rudimently) furnished flats which they had found.

As from 1st October, we have organized our action and activities around 2 axes:

The activities of aid

Our aid programme for the displaced of Djabal Al Sayde continues. The 14th Mountain Basket (Sallet al Djabal) was distributed to the 300 families on Friday 4 October. A distribution of winter clothing (the refugees left their appartments at the end of March wearing only their Spring garments) is planned for the end of

October. At the beginning of November, we will give them shoes and bottles of gas necessary for cooking. We have offered furniture as well as school books to the children. We do not forget our protégés of the Midane quarter who also receive a monthly food basket. Every day at noon we distribute a warm meal to 250 persons in need. And we continue with our "War wounded" project to freely treat civilians injured by acts of war who have not

the means to pay for their treatment.

The pedagogical activities

Now that our rooms have become available again with the departure of the displaced, and to return to our principal mission as Marists, the education of children, especially the least favoured, we have developed our pedagogic activities to respond to the immense needs created by the war. "Learn to Grow" has become larger and now has a twin brother. It is concerned with children of preschool age, from 3 to 6, by education, instruction and health. The initial project continues every afternoon from 3 to 6 with

55 children from poor or displaced families. The new project takes place every morning from 9 to 12.30 with 100 children from the families of the displaced from the schools. In parallel, in the mornings, a new project "I want to learn" is going to be launched and will involve 50 displaced children of school age from 7 to 13, but do not go to school, to teach them at least to read, to write and to calculate. The "Tawassol" programme continues 4 mornings a week and is aimed at providing the mothers, from 20 to 35, with courses in English, computers, teaching and manual trades in order to allow them, apart from improving

themselves, to follow their children in their lessons; English and computer are now in the school programme from the 1st class. Finally, the programme "Skills School" continues on certain afternoons for the adolescents. They now number over fifty.

I would like to emphasize that our various programmes are all directed to disadvantaged and/or displaced families and are entirely free.

We have still other projects we would like to implement. But, despite the 42 volunteers, the 6 salaried (chauffeur, in charge of supplies...) and

the 9 members of our team (3 Marist brothers, 6 lay people: 4 women and 2 men), we lack the manpower.

This is our situation. We are a bit more optimistic than 2 months ago but we are impatient for the war to cease. With the Marists of all the world, our motto for this year is: Sow Hope. In terminating, we wish to thank all the friends who support us by their friendship, messages, prayers and gifts.

Nabil Antaki
10 October 2013



LA VALLA, A POWERFUL HOUSE OF LIGHT

Inauguration of the renovated house of La Valla

The inauguration of the La Valla house took place on 5 October, from 4 to 6.30 p.m. in fairly clement weather. About 150 persons (heads and workers of the various enterprises, architects, Brothers of France and Catalonia, friends of the Brothers and inhabitants of La Valla) took part

in this beautiful gathering, marked by simplicity and fraternity. The various speakers laid emphasis on the meaning of these works of renovation for our Marist history today and tomorrow. The blessing of the house, presided over by the Vicar General of the diocese, reminded everyone that "if the Lord does not build the house, the masons work in vain."



Thanks to a very fine slideshow and a video of high quality, everyone was able to follow the evolution of the work site and realize the work accomplished and the results obtained, the quality of which was unanimously underlined. The sharing of a toast gave concrete expression to the spirit of harmony which has reigned throughout this long undertaking: the presence of the great majority of the firms is a strong witness to the way they carried out this work and to their pride in having participated in a special and so meaningful project. On leaving, many expressed their joy and gratitude for having experienced such a moment. The material renovation is finished, but a new page in its history is beginning for "the cradle of the Institute of the Little Brothers of Mary". Magnificat!

Brother Michel Morel



"AMANECER" SESSION – MANZIANA

Course for Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Brothers of the third age

These lines are a follow-up to previous information about the "Amancer" programme held at Manziana from 1 August to 29 September. Manziana is a little town, situated 60 km from Rome, enjoying an agreeable climate thanks to its altitude (369 metres). It has a population of about 6,951.

The house was built in 1949-1950 for the formation of Italian candidates to the Marist life. In 1993 the General Council decided to adapt it to make a centre of spirituality for English-speaking brothers, previously catered for at Fribourg in Switzerland. The building was restructured to provide 30 fine bedrooms, various rooms, a chapel, library, dining room, kitchen and other annexes or services.

For our "Amanecer" programme, the different subjects were treated by 12 presenters: eight brothers, two lay persons, and a Marianist priest. Both content and methodology were much appreciated. All made their talks available, photocopied or on computer.

The co-ordinating team – Brothers Lanelino Ortego, José Feix and Anthony Hunt – proved very active, although in a discrete and respectful way, allowing the brothers a healthy autonomy and personal responsibility. The unity and spirit of service of those directing fostered the joy of union, co-operation and responsibility on the part of all. The afternoons, left in principle to personal initiative, allowed the brothers to devote some time to the care of the house and grounds.

The part of the programme most appreciated was the stay at the Hermitage and the visit to the places associated with the life of the



Founder and the first brothers. The community of brothers and laity which coordinates the activities of the Hermitage was notable for its spirit of welcome and service and the assistance offered on the various visits. Br Benito showed himself an extraordinary animator of the life of the Hermitage. The evaluation emphasized the gratitude to the whole team of the house.

During the last two weeks, the brothers visited Viterbo and its historic centre, with the ruins of the Etruscan civilisation, the Marist college and the papal palace, residence of the popes in the XIII century, at the time of the longest conclave (33 months) ending in the election of Gregory X. The brothers also visited Orvieto with its XIV century cathedral, built to contain the corporals of the miracle of Bolsena. It has an extraordinarily artistic and majestic facade.

The group also visited Assisi and the catacombs of Saint Calixtus, in a more "religious" spirit. On the return, we had the leisure to appreciate Rocca di Papa, Frascati, Grotta Ferrata and Castel Gandolfo, the region known as the "Castelli Romani". The last Wednesday, the brothers attended the papal audience in St Peter's Square, among an impressive crowd.

The final days were reserved for the evaluation, an evening of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, concluding with a penitential celebration and administration of the sacrament of the sick. On the evening of 28 September, we showed our gratitude to the persons working in the house and their families with a festive meal, during which Br Massimo Radicetti, a participant, greeted all present. The next day, Sunday 29, was marked by the final meeting, with wise words from Br Lanelino and other expressions of thanks. During the Eucharist, we renewed our vows. A special dinner was the last community act, an expression of the joy, gratitude and union which marked this 2013 session. Thanks to the organisers and co-ordinators, and congratulations to all the participants.

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