

## BR EMILI TURÚ, SUPERIOR GENERAL, ORGANISES ENCOUNTER WITH 'BLUE MARISTS'

Brother Emili Turú was in Lebanon from Aug. 29 – Sept. 5 to accompany a group of 18 Brothers and laity of Aleppo, Syria, known as the 'Blue Marists.' In today's bulletin, we are publishing an interview with Br Emili on the encounter and a text of American psychologist Dr Robert J. Wicks, who accompanied the group for 3 days.

### Interview with Br Emili Turú

#### Why did this encounter with a group of Blue Marists take place?

**Br Emili:** Last May I met with the three Brothers of the community of Aleppo and I noticed that, even though they were all right, they were enduring enormous stress caused by the war they have been experiencing for over four years, and that it was appropriate to show them support in some way.

At that time, I proposed them to do some activity to help them cope with the situation, not only for themselves, but also for others who are part of the Blue Marists.

#### How was the two-day programme carried out?

**Br Emili:** Thanks to the support of Br Brendan Geary, provincial of West Central Europe, we contacted Dr

Robert Wicks, from the United States – world authority on the topic of resilience, who promptly and generously agreed to collaborate with us. In a surprisingly easy way, Dr Wicks, the Blue Marists, Br Juan Carlos Fuertes (who will



start as provincial of Mediterranean in Jan. 2016) and I were able to make our agendas coincide.

From that point, we jointly decided on the programme: the first day was on spirituality, prepared by me, and then another three days with Dr Wicks on resilience. The two remaining days were spent evaluating the programmes that

are being carried out and programming the future.

#### What spiritual contents did they work with you?

**Br Emili:** The question of God usually emerges strongly when one experiences extreme situations, such as those caused by a war.

And what emerges in these moments are often our preconceptions about God, that do not always correspond to the God of Jesus Christ. We ask ourselves 'where is God in this situation of war?' and the truth is that the maturity and the quality of answers by the participants in the encounter impressed me.

Another topic we reflected on and shared was about contemplative prayer as an excellent means to have a personal encounter with God, as well as a source of peace, serenity and harmony, even when bombs are falling around us.

**Can you tell us something on the topic of resilience?**

**Br Emili:** Wars cause a huge amount of stress in people due to many factors, which include the death of people who are close to you, or the uncertainty of the immediate or long-term future, or the sudden experience of significant losses, like work or one's home... Our Marists from Aleppo, by placing themselves at the service of the victims of war, live twice the amount of stress: their own and of those people they assist, who are sometimes very wounded and perhaps disproportionate expectations of what can be offered to them. Unfortunately, ending the war or the

huge difficulties that the residents of Aleppo go through is not in our hands, but to change the perspective or transform one's own attitudes before these situations is. And that is where resilience comes in; a capability that not only allows one to overcome the difficulties of life that we cannot change, but also to learn from them, to grow and to mature in the midst of them.



The vast experience of Dr Wicks on this subject allowed, firstly, that each person could give a name to what they are inwardly living, which is often unconscious.

Of course, this awareness is not enough, so he also offered a big amount of resources to be able to increase resilience and to help other people to do it, too.

**How has your personal experience been these days?**

**Br Emili:** They have been very intense days, not only because of the deep reflection that has been carried out, but also rather mostly because of the enormous emotional burden involved.

We did not talk of a country at war in an abstract way, but of people of flesh and blood, the bystanders, who face it daily.

It has been a privilege for me to be able to share with all of them and listen to their personal stories, their dreams, their battles, their frustrations, their pain, their huge desire to live a life that has meaning...

The human and spiritual quality of these Marists, as well as the depth of the motivations of those who being able to leave the country have decided to stay with their sisters and brothers of Aleppo, has impressed me.

Some of them told me that my messages that they have received over the last four years have been very supportive, but the truth is that I am the one who has learned from them, encouraged by their generosity and by their evangelical creativity.



# THOSE WHO STAYED

## Faithful Christian Caregivers and Educators in Aleppo, Syria - By Robert J. Wicks

Recently I returned from Beirut, LebYearn where I presented a workshop on resilience to caregivers and educators living and working in Aleppo, Syria. The event was the idea of Br Emili Turu, Superior General of the Marist Brothers. Last May, he had met with three Brothers of the community of Aleppo and noticed while they were

"all right" they were enduring enormous stress caused by the war they had been experiencing for over four years and that he believed it was appropriate to show them support in some way. As a result, he proposed to them to do some activity to help them cope with the situation—not only for them but also for others who were part of who were

referred to in Aleppo as the “Blue Marists” since they wore blue shirts to distinguish themselves to those they served. In line with this, I was asked to help out since Brother Emili knew of my writings on resilience and that one of his Provincials, Brother Brendan Geary, had been one of my doctoral students at Loyola University Maryland. And so, they invited me to lead a workshop, I accepted and went to Beirut to conduct it.

After I arrived back home, I saw the stories in the media of the challenges facing Syrian refugees and the suffering they must endure on their trek to a hopefully better future. However, at the same time I read and saw little of those who have remained in Syria to provide aid and solace. They are individuals who themselves also have little water, are pawns in a global battle that probably could have been avoided, and must face periodic bombing of their houses, places of work, and their infrastructure.

Some would ask me, “Why would President Obama and other Western leaders want to remove our President despite his faults? We don’t enter America or other countries and seek to remove their leaders?” Others would look at how Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city and its center of commerce, is now in ruins with half the population gone, few medical specialists remaining, and where there were few homeless before, they now have many who are holding on to what was left of their lives without a safe place to live. They have seen the wealthy, then the middle class, and finally even the poor now take every step possible to leave their homes. They see both the Christians and their ancient sites under attack. Yet, they still stay to provide hope and material comfort to the Christian and Muslim people who turn to them. The Blue Marists are amazing and an inspiration.

Remaining resilient in such instances takes a great deal of effort and faith that must be focused correctly if it is to remain and even flourish rather than simply burn out like so many other efforts in dark situations. Yet, when resiliency does deepen and grow, there is a recognition in those who experience it that it is not the amount of darkness in the



world or even in ourselves that matters; in the end it is how we stand in that darkness that matters.

Trauma from without and within need not be the last word...it may actually be the first word in a new sense of faith and life. However, to set the stage for this to happen, it is helpful for a number of recognitions to be in place. Otherwise, the intensity of our intentions to be stronger during the pain and suffering will be akin to trying to rid ourselves of a boomerang; the harder we try, the more we will unnecessarily face that which we are trying to eliminate.

And so, in the encounter with the “Blue Marists” of Aleppo the goal was to provide words of resilience that would help them put as much of their life and work into perspective as possible so their faith and living out of it would be as rich as possible even in, especially in, the darkness that surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed them. The words given them are not only valuable to them in their situation, they are also ones that aid all of us during experiences of loss, betrayal, anxiety, stress, and darkness. Four of them are: community, faithfulness, prayerfulness, and humility.

Especially in America where efficiency and individualism are so emphasized we fail to see that community and collaboration represent both a psychological and spiritual stalwart in times of great challenge. It would do us well to remember the saying from the Cameroons, “If you wish to go fast, go alone. If you wish to go far, go together.” Given this, the participants at the conference were told to be sensitive to four voices or friends in their community: the prophet who asks us the question, “To whose voices are you listening to as you decided your path in life?”; the cheerleader who offers us a sympathetic voice and helps us see the reflecting face of God’s love; the harasser or teaser who helps us catch ourselves when in an effort to take the care of others and our faith seriously we inadvertently take a detour and take ourselves too seriously instead; and finally, the inspirational or spiritual friend who calls us to be all that we can be without embarrassing us that we are where we are at this point.







Faithfulness is also an essential word of guidance, especially when we feel we are up against such great odds. When I was in South Africa speaking on resilience to persons in ministry, one of the social workers said vehemently, "I can't do it any longer. I must leave what I am doing." I asked her what her role was and she replied, "I work with women who have been abused and raped. They are often poor single parents who must take a day off from work that they can ill afford to go to court to present their case. More often than not, when they get there the judge looks at the paperwork, makes a face, and says, 'Oh, I haven't had time to look at this. Make Yearther appointment.' I am not succeeding in what I do. I am a failure."

I waited for a moment to let the emotions rest and then I said to her, "Who was with this woman at this moment of temporary defeat for her?" "Only me," she replied. "Then, would it be an exaggeration to say that you were closer to this woman than anyone else in the world at that moment?" After a short pause, she replied, "No, it wouldn't be." Then, in as gentle a voice as I could muster, I asked, "And you want to leave this?" Finally, after Yearther quiet period I added, "Don't you realize, it is not success that really matters, it is faithfulness."

Prayerfulness is a third key aspect in resilience. We not only need a rule of prayer, as the Abbas and Ammas of the fourth century needed so their faith would not become domesticated, we need a prayer life that is open to seeing God and making meaning in new and deeper ways when life becomes

traumatic or tough. A professional from the Red Cross with a focus on the spiritual who works with those going through crises as a result of trauma said she heard someone speak of her sense of God after a bus she rode on was bombed. The woman said that her initial response was to ask where God was to allow this to happen. Then, after a while she realized and shared where she believed God actually was during the bombing: "He was on he bus with me."

The final word I offer here, which was among the ones I offered the dedicated workers from Aleppo, Syria, is humility: an openness to seeing the truth in new ways. Such a cardinal virtue of the desert helps us to not be guilty of either the extreme of inordinate self-doubt, on the one hand, or extreme self-confidence on the other. However, such a virtue is hard to come by even if we wish it. By example from my own life, my daughter who is a social worker with the responsibility of helping severely injured returning Iraqi and Afghani vets, asked her two girls when they were very small, "What gifts do you think God has given you to share with others?" With great energy they shared many that they thought they had. Listening to this, my son in law asked them when they were done, "well what about humility?" To which the youngest asked, "What exactly do you mean by humility?" He, in turn, opened the dictionary, read the definition and asked them whom they thought of when he described humility. Immediately, my two granddaughters and daughter exclaimed, "Mom-Mom!" referring to my wife. He then asked, "Well, what about Pop-Pop?" to which they all shook their heads from side to side and said in a low voice, "No, not Pop-Pop."

Even if we want this virtue, it is not a given. Yet, if we wish to be resilient, we need to seek it because when we take knowledge and add humility, we get wisdom, and when we take this very wisdom and add it to compassion, we get love. And, God is love, and this love is at the heart of caregiving...and the heart of life.

The "Blue Marists" who work and live in Syria are in great darkness but they have stayed to help. Some will leave at some point, and they probably must and should. However, whether they stay or go at this point, they have deepened personally in their faith because of what they have done and how they have learned to resiliently face the darkness. They will also be remembered by the many they have served... and they definitely will be remembered by me, who came to serve them, and left inspired.

Dr. Robert J. Wicks is the author of a number of books on resilience including *Riding the Dragon*; *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life*; *Spiritual Resilience*; and the novel, *Conversations with a Guardian Angel*. He is also Professor Emeritus at Loyola University Maryland and lives in suburban Philadelphia.

