

Goodnight talk of Father Provincial of Middle-East Province (MOR) “Context and challenges in the Middle-East”

The Salesian Province of the Middle-East (MOR), with the name of “**Jesus, the Adolescent**”, has been canonically erected on January 20, 1902; it has Bethlehem as Provincial Head Office. It is composed of thirteen **(13) communities scattered in seven (7) different countries**: Palestine, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

The total number of confreres is 94 (ninety four): 30 are local confreres, 40 are Italian, and 24 from other different nationalities.

In the Province there are:

- 9 Oratories,
- 9 Schools within 5 different Salesian Settings,
- 1 Technical University,
- 4 Professional formation Centers,
- 3 Parishes,
- 4 Salesian presences among refugees and evacuees,
- 2 Aspirants-Juniorate Schools,
- 1 Pre-Novitiate,
- 1 Theology Seminary (Jerusalem Ratisbonne),
- 6 Centers of Salesian Cooperators.

Furthermore there are different houses with hospitality structures, different public churches and chaplaincies, the holy places of Beitgema “*Saint Stephen, Venerable Simon Srugi*”, the vine factory of Beitgema and Cremisan, the Artistic Center, the International Museum of the Nativity and the Bakery in Bethlehem, and finally the service at the Apostolic Nunciature in Jerusalem and in Tehran.

The Salesian Province of the Middle-East has an history of more than one hundred years of living presence in the Middle-East and today this presence is within seven different countries. This is one of the most complicated and difficult Province of the Salesian Congregation due to the cultural and linguistic differences, due to its history and traditions, for the different Christian faiths and Eastern Churches, for the conflicts among different countries, for the unsolved “Palestine Problem”, for the great presence of Islam, who form the majority of the population (Letter of the Rector Major to MOR, 2011).

The Challenges for the Christian People in the Middle-East:

! **Unity**: The Appeal of the Catholic Patriarchs re-echoes again: “*In the Middle-East, either we will be united Christians or we will disappear and fade away*”.

! **The exodus and migration from the Middle-East**: One of the most serious problems all Churches suffer of in the Middle-East is the problem of migration which has been constantly increasing through the last century. Those who suffer most due to

the exodus are our Christian brothers; this fact is considered a true hemorrhage and a true depopulation of Christians. Trustworthy statistics prove that some Churches (Armenian, Assyrian, Melkite, Maronite, Assyrian-Orthodox) have a greater number of faithful in the diaspora (between 50 to 70%) than in the area of origin. All together the Middle-East Christians abroad would be 12 million (against the 15-16 million in the region).

! **Lesser differential growth:** Another factor giving rise to the decrease of Christians in the Region is the lesser differential growth, due to the low birth rate of Christians compared to the Jewish and Muslim people.

! **Immigration in the Middle-East:** this is a relative recent phenomenon which took place during the last decades. Workers have left their country looking for job and they are coming mostly from the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri-Lanka) and from the Philippines and Ethiopia. Many of them (two millions and more) are Christians.

! **Living together with the faith of other religions;**

! **Growth of political Islam.**

Positive aspects of MOR

! The witnessing of communion given through our fraternal life in the Communities, keeping in mind that our Communities are international, and therefore constantly committed to an ongoing efforts of welcoming and of mutual acceptance, beyond differences of culture, age and formation.

! The witnessing of service to local Churches within which we are integrated, by accepting in our settings young and adult who belong to different Christian faiths and different rites.

! The attention to the poor and needy young people whom we welcome into our settings, with a particular attention to the displaced and the refugees.

! The commitment to build a interreligious dialogue particularly with Islam, through the welcoming and educational work of Christian youth and Muslims together, especially in our schools and professional formation Centers, yet even in some of our Oratories when such dialogue is possible.

! A good salesian spirit of the confreres, industriousness and feeling of belonging to each other.

! The richness of languages, cultures of different Countries, and the value of our Opera well integrated in the territory.

! The opening to "new frontiers" in the Upper Egypt and Iraq.

Negative points in the MOR

! In our apostolic work sometimes you notice a certain individualism, or a sectorial fragmented work. The work is carried on without a planning mentality, and there is little time for reflection, cross-examination and checking of the projects.

! In the apostolic work there is always the risk of a certain activism for a few confreres overloaded with work and responsibilities; while for others there is the risk of a comfortable and bourgeois way of life, without any passion for education and apostolic

zeal. On a few cases the operational, economic and administrative worries run the risk to prevail over the educative, pastoral worries which should be a priority objectives

! The lack of vocations, the meager vocational animation and the care of local vocations.

! The financial situation is difficult. There are problems about land-estates and properties. Administrative capacities must be strengthened.

! The socio-political situation is unstable and critical with an ongoing change.

! The lack of confreres in certain of our Works-Opera, both in number and quality.

! The lack of a strong animation at provincial level.

! The journey of inculturation has to be strengthened.

The socio-political situation in the Middle-East

Between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 the southern region has been hit by a wave of protest, violence and uprisings. Such events shook up the Arab societies at every level (social, political, economic, cultural, religious, educative...) with repercussions on our Houses and Communities. Those who suffered most are Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. I cannot now make an analysis of the different Countries, I limit myself to a short reflection on Egypt, while I will have a few minutes more about Syria.

The situation in Egypt

From 2011 up to now the situation is still a turmoil with great uncertainty; yet we can catch sight of positive signs of stabilization. Though in such a difficult situation, our three Communities have continued all their school and Oratory activities, trying to instill courage and hope into the hearts of our young people and collaborators.

The situation in Syria

As of today the situation in Syria is very much uncertain due to the rioting and bloody violence throughout the country.

Aleppo: As of now the salesian Community is composed of two confreres, who remained behind and stayed alongside with the people, particularly to the families of our young men of the Youth Center and of the Oratory. They express their closeness with a variety of pastoral and social activities and through personal visits to the families affected by the war. They organize periodical meetings programmed for various age ranges, in order to pray together. To all this they add the sharing of meals and time to a few recreational activities. Of course they don't miss the help with basic needs: food, medicines, money to cover certain expenses, they offer religious, spiritual and hagiographic books, etc. The door of our salesian Community in Aleppo is always open to anybody who is in need, because the love of Christ the Savior knows no borders. Every day a great number of families convey to our House because they don't know any other place where to stay together during the day.

Kafroun: On August 2012, the war began to pour over Aleppo too. Many families lost their house and they were forced to abandon it, and started to look for a kind a settling

elsewhere. It was during such time that the house of Kafroun opened its doors to ten of families of relatives of our salesian confreres, of cooperators and animators; they offered them lodging and food, together with a family atmosphere. As of today, due to the permanent presence and stay of a Salesian Confrere in the house, many take part in the Community's prayers, they help in the maintenance and in a various little works of the house, they live together moments of fraternal life. Their children are well integrated in the different schools of the area and they attend regularly to their lessons, and they use our vehicle to go to their classes. On the afternoon of Friday, Saturday and Sunday, the House of Kafroun become a "Youth Center" and "Oratory" for the boys and young men both of the nearby and far away villages and for the evacuees of the area. On Sunday, moreover, they attend the Holy Mass.

Damasco: The Salesian Community is composed of four confreres. Until the first half of July 2012, the formation, spiritual, cultural and sport activities of the Oratory-Youth Center of Damasco were going on regularly, with about 350 boys and girls of the Elementary and High School. By the end of July 2012 the atmosphere of peacefulness you could breath in the city, was radically changed due to the various outrages. Since then, besides the regular pastoral-educative daily activities, there are visits to the families of our boys and young men, various help in their basic needs and frequent gathering in small groups for an encounter of 2-3 days about human, spiritual and salesian formation.

I thank the Lord for the christian witnessing, solidarity and closeness given by the confreres of different Communities to the young and to the unfortunate families affected by this war since 2011. I feel the need to thank all those who helped us with their generosity so as to alleviate the suffering of so many people of Syria struck by such a calamity due to this war: benefactors, relatives, friends, charitable institutions, salesian confreres, ecc. Divine Providence has been truly generous by answering to our frequent requests of help. This made us capable to offer the necessary help to anyone who was in need and still needs our help.

Conclusion

! Before anything else as requirement for any option and project, I believe there must always be the quality of our witnessing, both personal and as a Community.

! We must go on with a healthy realism, yet with great courage, keeping in mind what Don Bosco said: *"In anything which deals to the good of the youth in danger or which is useful for the salvation of souls, I go ahead up to be daring and audacious"* (Biographical Memoirs, XIV, 662 ... italian edition -ndt).

I thank you with all my heart and let us pray for peace in the Middle-East

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