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400 years of the presence of Carmel in Iraq

It has been 400 years since the Discalced Carmelites first arrived in these lands of Iraq. It was in Basra, southern Iraq, not far from the Persian Gulf. Though today the Mission is under the responsibility of the Paris Province, the founder was Portuguese: Father Basil of St. Francis. The first Mass was celebrated on July 9, 1623. We, the Carmelite family, the friars, the Secular Order members, the Carmelite Sisters of St. Joseph, consecrated women, those devoted to wearing the scapular and the friends of Carmel celebrated a Mass of thanksgiving on Sunday the 19th of February 2023. It was presided our confrere Monsignor Jean Sleiman, Archbishop of Baghdad of the Latins.

We went on pilgrimage to the sources of our faith by going to Ur of the Chaldees, where we visited a ziggurat and Abraham's house.

We continued our journey by going to Baghdad to share together about the witness of Carmel in all these years. We also inaugurated a bust in honour of the first Iraqi Carmelite, Father Anastasius-Mary of Saint Elijah (1866-1947), a great scholar of the Arabic language, literature and philosophy.



SYRIE :

Chronicle from destruction and hope...

FEBRUARY 25-27, 2023

Saturday the 25th of February 2023
Destination Aleppo

After the days spent in Iraq celebrating the 400th anniversary of the presence of the Carmelites in the lands of Abraham (February 17-24), with lively celebrations full of communion with the Christians of Iraq, with the Carmel family, with friars and laity from France, Egypt, Lebanon and Italy, together with the Latin Archbishop of Baghdad, Msgr. Sleiman, a Discalced Carmelite... All this journey through the Middle East I made with the faithful company of Christophe-Marie, the French Definitor.

We flew to Beirut, Lebanon, the mythical land of the cedars, about whose beauty and glory the Bible sings. Here, Carmel has a living and rich presence: several communities of friars, two of Discalced Carmelite nuns, communities of Secular Carmel, schools, houses of formation, intense commitment to the National Caritas, etc. A land harshly tested by a brutal economic crisis with harsh consequences, a lot of immigration from the war in Syria and other countries. We took advantage of this coincidence of our passage towards Syria, to accompany the brothers of the Semi-Province of Lebanon, who were meeting in plenary assembly to discuss the task and challenges of formation, as part of the preparation of the Provincial Chapter.

We arrived on the evening of February 24 in Hazmieh, Beirut, and celebrated with the friars and the faithful the Way of the Cross, with beautiful hymns. The next day we went further north to Tripoli, to the community of Mijdlaya. After lunch, our journey to Syria began. Raimundo, the Provincial, took us. He a very experienced person in this adventure of crossing over into Syria.

It took us an hour or so to reach the border and about an hour to get past the three or four Lebanese and Syrian checkpoints. Finally, thanks to the efforts and good work of Raimundo, we entered Syrian territory. Military and police controls were constant. It was now 2.45 p.m. There was still another hour's journey to where we met Sister Anne, the prioress of the Carmelite nuns in Aleppo, who had come to pick us up with Levan, the driver. Our meeting point was in Homs, about 40 km from the border.



Levan recounted his adventures over these past days. Since the earthquake, he with his wife and two children had slept in the very car we are in. For three weeks now, the car had been their Refuge at night. Many people have not returned to their homes. The Marists have given lodging to around 800 people, the Salesians to about a thousand, many stay in their cars. They enter their homes during the day, at night they are afraid. There have been repeat earthquakes on a smaller scale.

As we entered Syria, it was like a landscape that is difficult to define. Endless miles of war-torn cities. Like soulless skeletons. We saw in some cities or towns people in the countryside sitting talking, children playing. Quite often some small flocks of sheep. The sun goes down at approximately 6.30.

We arrived at the Carmelite nuns' monastery at 8.30 p.m. We were welcomed by two refugee women and a young girl who helped put away the fruit and boxes we had brought. They welcomed us. We were told that our presence illuminates Aleppo (a typical Arab greeting).

We chatted animatedly with the Sisters. Much joy in meeting us. They shared with us some their impressions of this time; on the day of the first earthquake: at 4 a.m., everyone rushed out onto the street as they were, in their pyjamas, barefoot. It was raining, it was very cold. Those who were able took shelter in their cars. They were very afraid to return home.

The nuns immediately began to receive people and families who asked to be welcomed there. There are now about 50 people living in the monastery compound.

The nuns told us that in the choir, in a second earthquake, the statue of the Virgin began to move forward and also the vase with flowers. They were paralysed. Sister Hilda related that before the earthquake, their dog entered her room very agitated and, climbing onto the bed, began pawing her, as if wanting to say something. With an effort she cast him out of bed and kept sleeping. The dog stood beside the bed groaning. Only a few minutes after this reaction of the dog the earthquake began... Dogs and their sixth sense.

It is now 9.00 p.m. and the Sisters had prepared a very rich dinner in which there was no shortage of ingredients from the country and typical sweets. There was a burning fireplace in the living room and two nicely arranged bedrooms. Contrast all this beautiful welcome with the desolation outside, of which we had seen only a very small part.

Then we met volunteers from St. Vincent de Paul, who came to bring food. Although we had already had dinner, they insisted that we also receive our ration, a kind of potato omelette that they assured us was very rich. We accepted at all times what they offered us.

We greeted some of the families here who had a couple of children. Then we were to discover that there are quite a few families with many more children. A married couple asked us to please take them to Spain or Italy or wherever. Here they have nothing. They greeted us with a big smile, thanking us for our presence. They asked us for prayers.

The day ended with gratitude for having been able to get here, and to be able to bring a little closeness and comfort.



**Sunday,
the 26th of February 2023**

It is rather cold. There is no heating. The bed was a collection of blankets and some duvet. There was no hot water in our room, only when the sun rises. We were told later there had been another small earthquake at about 5.30. Let's go to prayer with the sisters. It is 6 o'clock in the morning and you can hear the muezzin singing softly in the distance. The chapel is cosy and has some heating. A very sober and beautiful chapel that invites silence. Designed by Sister Hilda, an architect.

There was a special joy to be here with them and with these families. Even if it were only for two days. The feeling of being in the appropriate place, making the whole Order present, comforting and letting us enter into the silence of their intimate prayer with the suffering Jesus and a tent open to the world.

We met one of the families: Mirna, Hana, Satina, George. Satina is doing maths, third year. She has only one year more to finish. She is very thin. She asks us, almost in tears, if we can help her get out of Syria: "there is no future here." We have no words, no answer. Just prayer. Most would like to get out of here, out of this horror. But who will rebuild Syria, who will fight from within to raise the ruins and encourage a hope that can only be born of the people of Syria themselves? How to rebuild so much destruction?

We talked to more refugees: Mina, Nayla, Ghada, Daud. Mina works at Caritas and goes to work every day. We talked to her mother and aunt. Mariam is perhaps the smallest of the refugees, and she never leaves our side, with her old lady's bag. She is from a Muslim family. Michel and Mary, with their son Gad, welcomed us on arrival; they also ask us if we can do anything to help them leave the country.

We met children who had made a tree their private refuge, surrounding it with a kind of wall, with an entrance door. Climbing the tree was also an adventure, to which some of us signed up, to the delight of the children.

At 4.00 p.m., we visited the Apostolic Vicariate of the Latins of Aleppo. The Vicar, Raimundo Girgis, a Franciscan, welcomed us at the door. Raimundo is a specialist in canon law for the Eastern Churches. We chatted animatedly. A priest of the Argentine Incarnate Word, Hugo Fabián Alániz, joined the conversation. We talked: fear has taken hold of the people. In the first earthquake, they received 130 people here and 170 in the second tremor. In the Franciscans next door, they have received 4000.

Raimundo celebrates Mass on Sundays in the Carmelites. It tells us not to lose hope. He strongly recommends that people do not leave the country, working together to lift





up the situation. War continues to mark the life of this country. Military service takes a large part of the youth. That means a mandatory eight years in the military. From the age of 18.

Raimundo recommended that we greet the Nuncio, Cardinal Mario Zenari, who lives in Damascus. I talked to him on the phone and he really appreciated the call. We expressed our closeness to our sisters in their guestbook, declaring the feelings of all Carmel, nuns, friars and seculars with them: (original in French)

"It was a dream to come to Aleppo to visit you and to be able to share with you the joy of our vocation. I thank God for these two days here in your home open to all refugees. You are, in your weakness, a parable from the Carmelite Gospel, a humble testimony of how God is a home and abode for those who are afraid and in desolation. May God be for each of you a source, home, food, hope and love forever. I am proud of your offering and your presence here. Continue to give life with enthusiasm and simplicity. You have been for me a gift of hope and faith that Carmel will be reborn according to the heart of God. In deep communion, every day in the Eucharist. God bless you."

**Monday,
the 27th of February 2023**

Our last day in Aleppo dawns. A few minutes after 5 o'clock in the morning, from the mosque the muezzin is heard again. It sounds like a sustained lament, which is very pleasant. The electricity is back right now.

We would not have wanted to leave Aleppo without visiting the city. The most devastated areas. The Carmelite convent is very solidly built and has suffered little damage. But we have been told about other desolate parts of the city.

Brother George Seba, a Marist, promised to take us walking in Aleppo. And I can say that the impression of this walk will never be erased. For three and a half hours through the streets of Aleppo with eyes wide open and soul overwhelmed. First we walked through the gardens full of tents, vans and trucks converted into street houses, long lines of people collecting bread or food, many people in the streets and sitting in the parks. We moved towards the part of the city most damaged by the war and also by the earthquake. The destruction from the war is endless. Buildings and houses riddled with bullets and demolished. We had to ask George to clarify what was caused by the war and what by the earthquake.

In the midst of so many crumbling buildings, we see children playing, people in the markets, men drinking tea in the street, veiled women coming and going, a child on his bike with his little brother, some having a drink on a terrace next to the Citadel of Aleppo, the feeling of a life that wakes up from the rubble and starts walking without fleeing.

We also visited a typical store with mountains of Aleppo soap. A shop with all the charm of the Middle East. George prepared a package with some soaps for us. During these days we experienced welcome, kindness, smiles, they lit our fireplace, they gave us soap, every day the refugee women prepared us some typical dish. With the Carmelites we did not give much thought to the tragedy, although we did ask how they lived through it and how their families were. But above all, with them, we prayed, visited the monastery, and laughed telling anecdotes that soothed and brought that air of Carmel that comforts and helps to stand up again and again. We celebrated the Eucharist with them for two days. It is overwhelming at the moment of consecration to see them prostrate themselves to the ground in adoration. A life surrendered in a yes without conditions. Fragile and defenceless women, who have been here for so many years as a silent and welcoming presence. Brave and simple, without fanfare. They have been collecting in the convent the bullets that fall, and they have made a rosary with all of them. They also show us a box full of more projectiles. The missile that fell in the orchard, unexploded, became very famous. From the terrace you can see some minarets of the headless mosques.



We have experienced with our sisters a fraternal familiarity and the Teresian air of brothers and sisters who turn around and sustain each other. These are the names of the sisters who live and offer their lives here in Aleppo, so that you may pray for them and with them:

Marie-Thérèse KHACHO, Syrian
 Mariam QREIT, Syrian
 Anne-Françoise MAURIN, French
 Anne BONNET, French
 Hilda GHAZZI, Syrian
 Mary ROUFAIL, Syrian
 Laetitia PEYRARD, French
 Marie-Elisabeth KHORANI, Iraqi

I felt in prayer, while we shared the silence, that in these two days my faith has become stronger, that their persevering prayer has given me strength, that it is they who have visited us and confirmed us in the need to take a step forward, in the midst of so many wars and earthquakes, the need to build a Carmel that says yes, with the audacity of these women. Where there is a community of Discalced Carmelites detached from themselves, joyful, who defy fear and do not seek to be safe, welcoming in their prayer and devotion the wounded history of so many; as long as there is only one monastery like the one in Aleppo, I am very proud to be a Carmelite and the son of Teresa.

Take care of each of my sisters, protect them, give them the inner warmth of that confidence with which you would clothe your sons and daughters more from the elements. In the unity of this great family of refugees and with all the battered people of Syria, do not allow us to forget all

that we have seen and heard, what has been given to us with hope by the same people who walk among ruins and who long for a land in peace and happiness.

While still on our way back to Lebanon, we visited another important, and equally devastated, city, HOMS, halfway to the border. Tony Homsy sj, a young superior, received us in the Jesuit house of Homs, where the Jesuit Frans Van Der Lokht was murdered in 2014. Originally from Holland, he had been in Syria for forty years. Very committed. We prayed at his grave; a silence overwhelmed by the lives of those who give themselves to the end. We remembered all Christians who have died in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East, or have been forced to emigrate far away, because of their faith. We prayed for all those who had lost their lives in this war and in this earthquake. May God receive them into his peace, into the most beautiful house we could imagine.

Teresa of Jesus said that we are stones for those who are to come... May God make each of us a stone that builds, rebuilds and sets up lives for all. More powerful than all wars and earthquakes, is the power of prayer, the strength of communion and hope that springs up in the risen smile of those who no longer have anything to lose and their only wealth is in giving. They, an incarnation of the Risen One, make us believe, against all hope, in the Promised Land already here.

Miguel Márquez Calle, OCD
 Rome, 25th of March, 2023
 Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord





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**General House, Discalced Carmelites,
Corso D'Italia 38, 00198 Rome,
Italy**

www.discalcedcarmelite.com