The importance of Eastern Christians' testimony for the secularized West

Meeting of ROACO members in June 2018

The Lieutenant General and the Governor General of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre participated in the 91st Plenary Assembly of the **Reunion of Aid Agencies for Oriental Churches (ROACO)**, organized in Rome (19-22 June 2018) by the Congregation for the Oriental Churches.

During his audience with ROACO, **Pope Francis** expressed his concern to see the number of Christians in the lands that were the cradle of Christianity decrease. "Today the Middle East is a crossroads of difficult situations and there is a risk - I do not want to say the will of some - the risk of erasing Christians. **A Middle East without Christians ... it would not be a Middle East,** "said the Holy Father, speaking spontaneously, without reading the prepared speech. He regretted the fact that many of those who have fled the fighting do not want to return "because of the profound suffering".

Realistically taking into account these difficulties, he wished to thank the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and the members of ROACO for work at the service of the Oriental Churches, their traditions, theology and liturgies.

"This is also the sap that comes from the roots to give life to our soul" in the West, teaching us the path of contemplation, of holiness, summarized the Successor of Peter, eager to value above all the hope that must be cultivated as an ideal in Middle East, "**The Land of Jesus**".

In his prepared speech - the text of which was delivered to participants - the Pope insisted on the **testimony of Christians in Jerusalem**, "the Holy City, whose identity and particular vocation needs to be safeguarded beyond different tensions and political disputes". He also stressed the importance of the care to be given to Christians in the Diaspora, "to carry forward their witness to the Gospel" "even in settings that are often even more secularized in the West, where they come as immigrants or refugees." They testify that "it is still worth living and suffering for the Gospel, even as a minority,

or the object of persecution, for the Gospel is the joy and the life of men and women of every age", he explained, also considering that the testimony of Eastern Christians opens a path towards the visible unity of Christians in all the Churches.

This theme of the suffering and diaspora of Eastern Christians occupied the work of the ROACO members, who had the opportunity to hear from apostolic nuncios in Turkey, Israel, Syria and Iraq, as well as from Msgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See Secretariat of State. Their discussions helped raise awareness of the fact that the Christians of the East are essentially victims of the war and not of organized persecution, contrary to the erroneous news reports of some biased propaganda.

Participants at the meeting presided over by the **Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri**, concluded that now more than ever the spiritual response to the colossal human tragedy in the Middle East lies in Christian-Muslim dialogue to rebuild the social fabric.

After having long analyzed the mediating mission of Christians in the complex mosaic of the East and the urgency of continuing to support their return (5000 families have already returned to Qaraqosh, on the Nineveh Plains, following the defeat of terrorist groups), the members of ROACO have tried to understand how best to "surround" and fraternally support the faithful of the Diaspora. Regarding the contributions of the various actors in the pastoral care of refugees – such as Monsignor Silvano Maria Tomasi, of the dicastery for Integral Human Development - it has been found that the **Christians of the East revitalize the local Churches of a secularized Europe, becoming true missionaries of the Gospel**, converting their historical drama into an unexpected source of renewal.

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New ROACO projects for 2018

The aid projects for the Oriental Churches for the second half of 2018 were presented during the ROACO Plenary Assembly. For his part, the Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone - Governor General of the Order - committed himself on behalf of the Grand Magisterium in favor of five projects in Palestine and in Jerusalem, for a total amount of about 230,000 Euros. In Bethlehem, it will regard fire safety work at the Holy Family Hospital, the restoration of the Maronite house of San Charbel, and the renovation of the kitchen of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters in a refugee camp. The Order also supports the rebuilding of an atrium in the school of the Sisters of the Apparition in Ramallah, as well as air conditioning for the classrooms in Holy Mary kindergarten, in Bethany (Jerusalem).