

Inspired

Spring 2017



Stories of sharing and discovery from people in global communion

The Road to Damascus

By Deacon Mickey Friesen
Director, Center for Mission



Lent is our annual Christian pilgrimage to renew our faith as we retrace the footsteps of Jesus and walk with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem

- the way of the cross. Along the way, as Jesus passed through Galilee, Samaria and Judea, he stopped to teach, to heal, to forgive, to feed the hungry and to raise up those in need. Today, if you want to retrace this way of Jesus you will pass through the lands of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria: the Holy Land.

Being a Christian in the Middle East today is difficult. With the exception of Lebanon, Christians are a small minority. For example, in Syria less than 10 percent of the people are Christian. Since the Syria civil war, as many as 386,000 Syrians have died, 4.5 million have fled, and 6.5 million people have been displaced within the country - half are children. In the capital of Damascus, Christians struggle together to live out their faith and are paying a high price for their discipleship. Between the civil war and



Muslim intolerance, Christian faith and lives are being threatened. Like the early Christians who fled persecution, Christians in the Holy Land are finding a special bond in their suffering. Archbishop Samir Nassar, the Archbishop of Damascus, recalled a meeting of the bishops of the Middle East. He said their shared pain "evoked an ecumenical suffering that is uniting, in the same Calvary, all the Christians of the East...a difficult, painful and providential path of unity." He wondered, "Could this suffering lead to reconciliation between the religions and people of the Middle East? Could we see life and peace streaming out of the cross?" Christians in the Middle East feel isolated from the rest of the Church outside of their communities. They "...simply want Christians in the West to know that they exist."

Last fall, the U.S. Bishops took up this desire of the persecuted in the Middle East and determined how Catholics in the United States can let our brothers and sisters in the Middle East know that we support them and are in solidarity with their suffering. They encouraged three areas of activity: advocacy, humanitarian aid and ecumenical support. They stated, "Although the vast majority of today's refugees are non-Christian; the vast majority of those who serve them are Christians who continue to be salt and light in the world. ...Today Christians are more united than ever, through a common suffering, a

common martyrdom and a common assistance to those in need."

In response to the U.S Bishops call to solidarity with Christians in the Middle East, the Holy Land, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has been discerning ways that Catholics can respond.

We are being invited to a twinning relationship with one particular Church in the Holy Land - the Archdiocese of Damascus in Syria. As we claim St. Paul to be the patron saint of our archdiocese, it seems providential that we are being invited to Damascus. Like St. Paul, who encountered Christ along the way to Damascus, so too we may go down this road to Damascus and hear the Lord say, "I am Jesus, the one who is being persecuted."

As we begin our relationship with the besieged and struggling Archdiocese of Damascus, we invite you to experience the personal destruction of Christians and others in the Holy Land through stories and images in this newsletter. An opportunity to begin our relationship through the most pressing need, humanitarian aid, is highlighted within the newsletter.

We invite you to begin down the road to Damascus.



Serving the global mission activity of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Images from the Archdiocese of Damascus, Syria



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Personal Stories from Syria

Catholic Relief Services

Catholic Relief Services is actively assisting Syrian refugees escaping the destruction and horrors of war. The Center for Mission represents CRS for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Takeena Mteir

Takeena looks like a typical 11 year-old. And in some ways, she is with her pink T-shirt and nail polish. But for more than four years, Takeena, her parents and eight siblings have lived in a makeshift shelter with wood beams and tarps in Lebanon's remote Bekaa Valley.



This was where Takeena's father, Isameil, used to work on a farm to support his family back in Syria. Then when civil war came to Syria, he fled with his family to live in Lebanon. With no end in sight to that conflict, they live in limbo.

Takeena's mother, Turfa, describes her daughter as a bright child who is looking out for her siblings. "She likes to know about everything," Turfa explains. Turfa hopes that her daughter will someday become a teacher. In the meantime, they are focused on day-to-day survival.

"If God let the war end tomorrow," says Turfa, "we would walk barefoot back home."

Hassan Zaroid

Before the Syrian civil war, Hassan Zaroid owned his own business in the Syrian city of Homs. "I was happy. I had a house. I had a car," he says, "but then I lost everything."

In 2012, he and his pregnant wife decided it was too dangerous to stay in Syria. So they fled to Jordan with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Hassan was unable to work because of his refugee status and was depressed, feeling "so much emptiness."



Hassan began volunteering at Caritas Jordan to help other refugees and began feeling more hopeful about a future that is, unfortunately, still filled with uncertainty. "I've gotten better. Through my prayers to God I feel optimistic that tomorrow will be a better day," states Hassan.

Personal Stories from Syria

*from Maronite Archbishop Samir Nassar
Damascus, Syria*



These are some of the many stories Maronite Archbishop Nassar of Damascus hears daily. They are told by the Archbishop.

A father who has lost everything came into the church and said aloud, "I have no home and I have lost all my family. I do not have work, I'm hungry and sick without medication. I can't get a visa to go to another country. I am like a beetle at the bottom of a cup who cannot get out and runs in circles until it dies at the bottom." Many Syrians feel like this man. It seems to many that all doors to survival are closed.

A mother who fled the bombing of her village with her four children was forced, after five hours of hiking in the mountains and valleys, to abandon her two smallest children. Eventually, she arrived breathless with the two oldest at a refugee camp in Lebanon.

She was sobbing because she had to abandon her two littlest kids. She couldn't carry them any more. She had to choose between the death of all of the family and the survival of some. How can we imagine the suffering of this mother? This was a horrible, cruel situation forced on her. The heartbreaking scene rejoins Mary at the foot of the Cross...



Christians fleeing villages: Strategic Culture Foundation

Archbishop Nassar, remembering what the Apostolic Nuncio articulated at a meeting of the bishops, recognized that the refugee situation was an ecumenical tragedy. The long list of suffering refugees, which is growing every day to over 6 million Syrians, affects both Christians and Muslims.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The Holy Land collection in parishes is held on Good Friday, April 14, 2017. As we begin our relationship with the Archdiocese of Damascus, humanitarian aid is most in need.

Any additional donations above previous collections for the Holy Land appeal, will indeed continue to go to the Holy Land, but will be designated for our brothers and sisters in the Archdiocese of Damascus.

Please be as generous as you are able.



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"How you can help?"



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