

## Eastern Christians: the three lessons of martyrs

“The history of the Church, the true history of the Church is that of the saints and the martyrs: her persecuted martyrs.” These recent words of Pope Francis’ remind us particularly forcefully of the “serious moment” in Christian existence: that testimony that every baptised person is called to give, even in the face of persecution and even, if God asks it, to the point of shedding their own blood. This is a reality bluntly foretold in the Mission Discourse in Chapter 10 of St Mark’s Gospel and one that has been confirmed by 2,000 years of history. But seeing it for oneself nowadays, amongst the refugees in Erbil (as it was granted me last June, at the invitation of Patriarchs Béchara Raï and Louis Sako), is an experience that remains engraved on one’s heart and in one’s memory forever. It sheds a new light on the tragic events in the Middle East – the flames of a war showing no signs of calming down – and their repercussions for an overly apathetic and self-absorbed Europe that seems only recently to have begun waking up from the torpor into which she had plummeted.

Taking up an expression of St Paul’s (*1 Cor 2:16*), Maximus the Confessor states that having “the mind of Christ” means thinking according to Christ but, above all, “thinking Him through all things.” This is the meaning of the Incarnation. This is the Christian genius. So what does it mean to have the mind (the *mens*) of Christ as regards what is happening in the Middle East? I believe it means – before all the geo-political, economic and strategic considerations – facing up to a simple observation: in those lands, people are being martyred. I am convinced that this fact, which we are finding hard to face, is enormously significant not only for the Church, but also for a deeper understanding both of the root cause of the persisting conflict in the Middle East and of the impotence in which the West is floundering. The mind of Christ is the principle that explains reality, all reality, and it seems to me that it has at least three lessons for us here.

### Precious Treasure

The first concerns the place of martyrdom in the life of the Church. This is certainly not the occasion on which to retrace Eastern Christianity’s long history; others have already done so in a masterly fashion, including in this edition of *Oasis*. There nevertheless remains the fact that, over the last few decades, two particularly tragic phenomena have become intertwined in this area of the world: on the one hand, the attempt to build more homogeneous states through the absorption and “normalization” of ethnic and religious minorities and, on the other, a clear return to Islamist fundamentalism, which, from the 1960s onwards, has been reintroducing a religious language and discriminatory practices that seemed definitively outgrown. It would hardly have been conceivable that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, people would once again have started talking about *jizya*, the tax on non-Muslims that flouts every modern concept of equal rights and duties! And yet it has happened, and well before ISIS became a media phenomenon. Then the collapse of many Middle Eastern states, attested by the rebellions in 2011, triggered the most recent qualitative leap from discrimination to open persecution, forcing whole populations

to leave their homes hastily in order to avoid massacres.

It will be for the historians to give their verdict on this long-term process, regarding which the Christian communities, too, have made errors of judgement. But what is most striking today are the plain facts: “Let us think of our brothers whose throats were slit on the beach in Libya; of the young boy who was burnt alive by his companions because he was a Christian; of those migrants thrown into the open sea [...] because they were Christians; of those Ethiopians, assassinated because they were Christians.”

These episodes are, first and foremost, a challenge to every person’s faith. They put a new vigour into our striving for holiness, forcing us to come out of ourselves. Personally, when I visited the refugee camps in Erbil I was shocked by the conditions of radical deprivation in which the Christian refugees – and other persecuted minorities – have been forced to live since the terrorists’ threatening advance obliged them to abandon their towns, homes and work at only a few hours’ notice. And yet, in this extraordinarily difficult situation that is barely liveable, I saw an admirable dignity in them. But what continues to probe and challenge me, more than anything else, is the extraordinary faith that keeps their hope alive, even when facing a future that appears to be on hold.

From our limited standpoint, we cannot gauge the effect these testimonies may have outside and inside the Church. There is only one thing that we do know with certainty: they are far too precious a treasure to be squandered. For precisely this reason, it seems to me that there is a particularly urgent need to announce a day celebrating the new Middle Eastern martyrs.[Without denying the specific features both of every Catholic rite and of the other Christian Churches and communities living in the region, this day could take the form of a feast shared with the various other Christian denominations and devoted to celebrating the memory of the modern martyrs. Martyrs who, in all the variety of their religious affiliations, are paying with their lives for their faithfulness to Christ *in our time, in the Middle East*. This day would also be a providential opportunity to ask forgiveness for the divisions between Christians; divisions that in the past have led even to bloody conflict between different communities. This is the “ecumenism of blood” that Pope Francis talks about so frequently. The tragic moment that the region is now passing through could then become a propitious opportunity to overcome what separates us and seek what unites us. Thus even the evil of persecution could turn into the good of a greater unity.

### **The True Victory**

And yet, the lesson that the Eastern Christians are entrusting to the world is not a purely intra-ecclesial one. It also has some very concrete political points to teach us: they allow us a deeper understanding of the virus that has destroyed whole countries, from Syria to Iraq. But where has this illness come from? From the quest for victory at any price by overwhelming and annihilating

the enemy. Nowadays, everyone in the Middle East is frenetically making alliances, undoing them and calling upon ever-new foreign players for help and protection, in an escalation of violence that ends up becoming self-fuelling. And yet it has never appeared clearer that this path leads only to death and destruction. The consequential process of “de-humanization” hits the “religiously different” first of all, but it does not stop there. After the non-Muslims, it is the turn of the Muslims of a different confession (Sunnis against Shi‘ites and vice versa), then the “deviant” Muslims and, finally, all those who cannot demonstrate perfect orthopraxy, following a pattern of gradually increasing intolerance already seen on many other occasions.

The martyrs of our time say “No!” to this plan, loud and clear. This is not the way for the Middle East. More homogeneity does not mean less conflicts, because there will always be someone “more fundamentalist than me” who will try to bend me to his belief. And this is not the victory to be pursued, even at the temporal level. On the contrary, the real victory is Easter; it is the Risen Christ who agrees to take the world’s sin upon Himself and, through His obedience, destroys the body of sin (see *Rm* 6:6). A victory with a universal scope that also reaches out to non-believers.

In this way, the martyr exposes the counter-testimony of the jihadist or suicide bomber down to its root, showing where the error in every form of fundamentalism lies: in the claim to be able to sunder the indivisible “truth-freedom” tandem. But not only exposes it: heals and repairs it, as well. Indeed, if suicide bombers think that they are able to impose their truth whilst disregarding the suffering of their victims, martyrs remove the irreparability from evil by suffering what the guilty person should have suffered. Thus, these episodes of martyrdom in our time involves a cultural and political significance of the Glorious Cross that is still waiting to be fully appreciated. Such fact could, amongst other things, suggest a new way of presenting this crucial point of Christian faith, which has always caused scandal. Indeed, today the logic of the Glorious Cross still remains the only one capable of fully illuminating political choices. And the martyrs testify to this, not with words but through their actions.

## **A Change of Pace**

But the extremely hard test that the Eastern Christian communities are going through is also mercilessly laying bare the West’s abdication from its own selfhood. Whilst the United States have been actively contributing to Iraq’s destabilization, Europe has provided evidence of all its impotence in Syria. Betraying its historical mission to defend freedom and the so-called “European values” that it would now seek to deploy against terrorism, the Union has preferred to look the other way. Caught up in its own narcissism, it has ignored the conflict, save for some humanitarian aid on its borders, and has pretended not to see the rapid rise of sectarian hatred, the hundreds of thousands of deaths and the millions of displaced persons. It only woke up again when the columns of refugees began exerting pressure on its borders.

Now there is an emergency and emergencies never lead to wise decisions because they muddle together different phenomena: in this case the refugees, coming mainly from the Middle East, and the economic migrants, arriving from other countries, to whom different criteria must be applied, without derogating from the obligation to honour every person's dignity. Despite all the delays and closed doors, it appears that something is finally beginning to move at the political level; favouring the passage from a day by day approach to a structural vision based on the awareness that the process is too vast to be controlled. But as far as the refugees are concerned, the obligatory reception remains a makeshift solution: the real, long-term objective – and the Eastern bishops do not tire of repeating this – is to turn the Middle East back into a region where all can live and where it may be possible to have a future.

That will probably require taking braver action to stop the unjust aggressor in the immediate future, as several figures have reminded us. Indeed, “To stop an unjust aggressor is a right of humanity, but it is also a right of the aggressor to be stopped in order not to do evil.” It will also be necessary to take note of the fact that, in many cases, these years of war have so deeply wounded relations between the various communities that it is difficult to imagine them journeying together in the immediate future. And it will also be necessary to start talking about the refugees' right to return.

However, in order for any initiative to have some chance of succeeding, the absolute priority is to set up a sort of 'Marshall Plan' that can guarantee the possibility of choosing whether to stay or return; just as occurred in Europe at the end of the Second World War, when a continent reduced to rubble found the way to rise from its ashes in only a few years. The enormous power that technology gives us carries with it a worryingly destructive capability and the Middle East is gaining bitter experience of that. But it also offers the possibility of reversing situations that seem irremediably compromised. Because, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'* (at point no. 13), “The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.”

**Source : Emmanuel Durand, professeur à la Faculté de Théologie et de Sciences religieuses de l'Institut Catholique de Paris. Extrait de *Faut-il repenser la qualification chrétienne du martyr ? Critères théologiques et opportunité pastorale.***