

Letter from Aleppo No 34 (November 4th 2018)

To persevere

In the last weeks, we have seen many friends arriving, who had left the country during the war. They were often alone. Seeing the shutters of their houses open or meeting them in the street, revived in us the hope; the long-awaited hope of their return which would mean the end of the war, the end of the nightmare of emigration and especially the return to life.

We accompanied them to visit the city.

We became touristic guides of the destroyed souk and of the neighborhoods ravaged by hatred. It was necessary to explain the suffering of those who had to stay. Many expressed their astonishment at their will to live and to survive. And to our question “do you intend to stay?”, the negative or hidden answer brought us back to the bitter reality of emigration.

It is true that December 2016 put an end to the division of the city into two parts. It is true that since then, the reconstruction has become a priority for the government and the population. It is true that some families who had fled the eastern part of the city and whose house is more or less habitable, have returned home. It is true that the water and power services have improved.

But there remains the essential: **The human**. The one who contributed to the war and the one who suffered from it. What about this person, in what mental state is he/she? Did that person stay balanced at the end of the war? How to remedy the wounds of the war? How to move toward reconciliation? How to react to the violence of some people? What educational path should the children of war follow? Which advice to give to the young people about making decisions for the future? How to support all the couples and families? And above all, how to revive the flame of hope?

There is also the wish that peace reigns over the entire country and that there are no longer pockets of war like the province of Idlib and the countryside west of Aleppo and the northeastern part of Syria.

There are also those hundreds of thousands of families who continue to live in tents in refugee camps inside the country or in neighboring countries.

The fact remains that the West should decide to lift the sanctions that penalize the population. The Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights

Council on Unilateral Coercive Measures following his recent visit to Damascus, declared: "I am deeply concerned by the fact that the unilateral coercive measures contribute to the suffering of the Syrian people. Given the economic and human suffering caused by these measures, it is hard to believe that they exist to protect Syrians or to encourage democratic transition".

Our friends who returned, for a bit of time, to check on their houses or to solve few problems, depart while leaving us in a big question: "would we be destined to leave the country?"

In fact, the flow of families or people who want to or who leave the country has not stopped.

In September 2018, the Vatican "Dicastery for promoting integral human development" published a report: "The answer of the catholic institutions to the Iraqi and Syrian crisis 2017-2018".

Here are few extracts:

"In Syria, more than 13 million people need help: there are 6.6 million internally displaced and 5.6 million of registered refugees in neighboring countries, mainly in turkey, Lebanon and Jordan."

..." The education, the health and the psychosocial support remain the priority areas of intervention, but the major challenge today lies in the response to an ever increasing need for stability for the future of families, through agri-economic development programs, social and economic recovery, vocational training and the creation of job opportunities."

We, the Blue Marists, and without waiting for those recommendations, had, for several years, undertaken programs of education, of human development and the creation of job opportunities.

The month of September was devoted for the training of the teachers of our two educational programs "I want to learn" and "learn to grow". Soumaya Hallak, Swiss of Syrian origin, trained them in the post traumatic therapy through music. Bahjat Azrieh, a psychologist, introduced them to the "skills of life". Finally, Veronica Hurtubia from the catholic university of Milan and in collaboration with the BICE (Catholic International Bureau of Childhood), led a first stage of training in resilience.

The 90 children of “I want to learn” started their year in early October 2018. The 55 children of “Learn to grow” joined them in late October. During all the summer months, their teachers created a new curriculum adapted to the situation of our children.

A new team has come to strengthen our psycho-educational work. The project is called “SEEDS”. Five people are going to work with the different age groups: from preschool to adults including the young adolescents.

The program “Development of the woman” brings together around forty ladies for several weekly training sessions on important topics such as health, psychology, cooking...

Heartmade, our fabric and clothing recycling project, is growing fast with the slogan: “Avoid waste, learn perfection, achieve beauty”. We have increased the number of women working in the workshop to get a greater production. The Facebook page of the project presents their unique pieces.

“Cut and Sew”, provides 16 women for its fifth session a training in this field. In addition to the program itself, several human and personal developmental training are provided.

“How to create your own micro project” is one of the goals of MIT. We believe that moving to the post war stage requires to launch some micro projects that allow people, especially the young people, to live with dignity and to take root in the country. In groups of 24, young and older people attend the classes, get trained and write their own projects and present it to a jury who study it thoroughly. We offer the qualified people a generous donation that will allow them to launch their project. They are accompanied by a mentor who helps them to achieve and ensure continuity. So far, we have funded seventy micro projects.

The medical project continues. This is a great service provided to the sick people. We, the Blue Marists, with other charitable organizations, help the patients to get treatment or surgery, or to buy the medicines they need.

Drop of milk, remains a project of great success. The approximately three thousand children under the age of eleven are supplied monthly. All the parents express their gratitude.

Every Wednesday and Sunday, around twenty of our volunteers, go to the displaced camp "AL SHAHBA" located at 25 km from Aleppo. 120 families are living in tents. Our presence and our action have improved their living conditions. The youngest have a time of body language and playful experience. The school age children learn to read and write. Young teenagers are followed by a group of volunteers who allow them to reflect on issues that affect their lives and their displacement. Finally, the women are trained by a very good team. Sometimes doctors or specialized people join us to provide them with a quality training. The distributions of food, clothing, blankets and medicines meet their enormous needs as much as possible.

Christmas is peeking on the horizon! It brings with it the hope of peace and reconciliation. For our city, Aleppo, for our country Syria, for our people, we hope that Christmas will be the time of meeting and not a time of goodbye.

We work so that the civilization of love and peace will reign over our land and in the hearts.

Aleppo, November 4th 2018
Fr. Georges Sabe
For the Blue Marists.