

The mission of the Franciscan friars of the Custody of the Holy Land in Syria

**Support the remaining population.
Aid Syrian and Iraqi families who are refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.
Ensure the education of children.
Address the serious health crisis.**

The presence of the Custody of the Holy Land in Syria and neighboring countries has been continuous and active, thanks to the support of Association pro Terra Sancta, but the requirement for assistance has continued to increase. **The friars present in the St. Paul Region, which includes Syria, Jordan and Libya, number 27, of whom 14 are in the areas of serious conflict over the past four years.**

Attacks on the parishes, churches and reception centers continue on a regular basis, particularly in the North, in Aleppo and in the villages of the Orontes Valley near the Turkish border

The international press reported last July on a missile that fell on the Franciscan monastery in Yacoubieh, fortunately without any victims. During the night of 5 October a number of rebels linked to Jahbat Al-Nusra entered the Monastery of St. Joseph in Knayeh and kidnapped the Parish priest Father Hanna Jallouf and several civilians.

Many other attacks have gone unreported, however, such as the one witnessed by the Parish priest of Aleppo, Father Ibrahim Alsabagh, this past 27 February at the church of Azizieh during the evening Mass: a gas bomb caused two deaths among the faithful and there were several wounded just outside the religious site.

The fundraising campaigns have enabled continued aid to be provided to the Monasteries and four Reception Centers in Syria where the friars are present. In addition, new projects were started several months ago with the aim of helping Syrian and Iraqi families who are refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, while in Syria itself the Association has been trying to respond to the serious and growing health crisis by supporting one of the Hospitals in Aleppo.

THE REFUGEES IN LEBANON AND JORDAN

The Syrian refugee crisis has overwhelmed the ability to react, as there are more than 3.8 million refugees registered in the neighboring countries alone. **Lebanon, with 1.6 million Syrian exiles, in addition to 300,000 Palestinians and 9,000 Iraqis, has more refugees than any other country in the world.** The demographic and economic pressure in the country is very severe. People are living in makeshift camps near the old Palestinian refugee camps. Many are young people under the age of 25, with no more than primary school education. **In Jordan there are 650,000 Syrians** living in non-storm resistant tents, often without heating.

Many families arrived in these neighboring countries at the beginning of the war, hoping to be able to support themselves for a short time with their own resources and then be able to return to their country. They did not foresee that the conflict would last for more than four years. Now they find themselves without income in a foreign country that doesn't provide them anything, in a situation where they are unable to pay for housing or to have a decent life, to take care of themselves, and to provide their children with even a minimum education.

The Association pro Terra Sancta campaign "Emergency Syria" is providing aid for these victims of the conflict who are turning increasingly to the Franciscan fathers for support. They are Syrians, Iraqis and Kurds from the refugee camps in Harissa, Tripoli, Beirut, Amman and Madaba.

HEALTH CRISIS

In addition to the normal needs for food, clothing and money – to pay for rent, for making repairs to homes and for providing a minimum level of education – in Syria the difficulties have increased exponentially due to the **health emergency**.

New funds are needed to provide for medical care and for purchasing medicines, the repair and replacement of crucial medical equipment and to ensure the presence of qualified personnel in the hospitals. Many doctors have fled the country or have been killed or imprisoned. Those who have remained are not receiving their salaries and are paid only when they perform an operation.

In Aleppo it is often nearly impossible to perform medical operations due to the lack of water and electricity. The latter is interrupted for several hours at a time each day, and sometimes for three or four days. The necessary medical equipment for operations, reanimation and diagnosis has been damaged by the bombardments and the lack of maintenance due to the closure of many businesses. Many people go to Jordan or Lebanon for treatment of illnesses not due to the conflict, such as diabetes, cancer, scoliosis and cardio-vascular problems. As a result of the lack of pharmaceuticals, chemotherapy treatments have been suspended: 70,000 children are ill from cancer and 5,000 are in dialysis. In the neighboring countries operations are very expensive. A simple appendectomy costs \$1,500 instead of \$400.

There has been a significant increase in epidemics, resulting from the lack of hygiene and from malnutrition, including hepatitis, gastroenteritis, tuberculosis as well as psychological and neurological disorders (these last two beginning to become a serious problem also in the refugee camps in the neighboring countries). Lack of immunization is increasing the risk of the spread of diseases such as polio.

The 4 reception centers created by the Franciscans are able to meet basic medical needs, as well as dispensing medicines and providing financial support for the poorest families. In 2015 the Association is planning to intervene in an even more active manner by renovating a hospital in Aleppo: putting back into service the three operating theaters and the two reanimation rooms; purchasing medical equipment for carrying out diagnoses, as well as beds, doors and stretchers.

THE PRESENCE OF THE CUSTODY OF THE HOLY LAND IN SYRIA, JORDAN AND LEBANON

Humanitarian organizations face serious difficulties for entering Syria and operating directly in the country: for this reason most of the financial interventions are being managed at a distance from the neighboring countries. **The presence of the Parishes and Monasteries allows the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land greater freedom to provide aid to the population, albeit at great risk.** They continue to travel back and forth between Lebanon and Jordan, but keep a low profile by not releasing statements to the press in order not to risk their ability to move around freely, and to protect the interests of their fellow friars who are living in the north, in areas controlled by the rebels.

In Syria the Franciscan friars represent the Catholic Church of the Latin rite. Currently they number 14, residing in Damascus, Aleppo and in a number of villages in the Orontes Valley near the border with Turkey. Also present are a number of religious sisters and volunteers to “help those who have lost everything: even hope”, as the Custos of the Holy Land *Fra Pierbattista Pizzaballa* has noted on a number of occasions. Their dedicated work is allowing essential aid to be provided to the population: food, medicine, clothing and education for their children.

The cost of living is very high and rapidly increasing due to the embargo imposed on Syria which has eliminated all types of foreign trade, including imports of food and medicines. The official exchange rate with the dollar offered by Syrian banks, set by government decree, is a very unfavorable one compared both to that available in Lebanon (30-50% premium) and on the black market. The rate given for dollars in the banks is 211 SYP, compared to 255 SYP on the black market.

Father Simon Herro, in charge of the St. Paul Region for the Custody of the Holy Land has called attention to the fact that diesel fuel, which before cost 80 SYP per liter, today has risen to 128 (\$0.60) and is very difficult to find. At times the price reaches 250 SYP and one has to wait in line for 8-10 hours to buy a maximum of 20 liters.

A liter of milk costs 1,300 SYP (more than \$6) and is also almost impossible to find. A can of tuna costs 200 SYP, while a liter of fuel oil has risen from 825 to 1,000 SYP (nearly \$5) and in some places up to 1,300 SYP. Bread has increased in price from 80 SYP per kilo to 125 SYP and to buy it one has to wait hours for one's turn.

Christians and Muslims turn to the friars every day to find a moment of peace, a warm place to stay for a few hours and where they can stock up on some water, thanks to the wells built before the start of the conflict.

The war affects everyone, regardless of their religion, and solidarity among the various communities is very strong. Those who have remained do not have the money or strength to escape. They are primarily the poor and the elderly. There are still some young people, many of whom come each day to the monasteries and parishes, where there are organized recreational activities and where the generator allows them to study during the hours when there is no electricity in the town.

SYRIA_ Damascus. At *Bab Touma* is the Monastery of St. Paul and the Chapel of St. Anania; at *Tabbaleh*, the Memorial to St. Paul (where his conversion took place) and at *Salhie*, which is nearby, the Monastery of St. Anthony. Here the situation is more tranquil and there is no danger for the Holy Places such as that which is taking place in Iraq, but the population is at a low ebb, with no work, nor prospect of jobs. Along the coast at *Lattakia*, the most important Syrian port, is the Monastery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus where in addition to a medical dispensary and kindergarten a reception center has been set up for people fleeing from the north.

The situation in *Aleppo* is extremely serious. The friars continue to carry out aid and parish activities at the Monastery of St. Anthony of Padua, and nearby in *El Ram* at the Monastery of St. Bonaventure and in *Azizie* at the Monastery of St. Francis.

In the Orontes Valley the Franciscans are present in a number of villages. It is very difficult to communicate with them. At *Knayeh*, near the Turkish border, is the Monastery of St. Joseph; a bit further to the south at *Ghassanieh* is the Monastery of St. Anthony of Padua, at *Jisr El-Choughour* is the Monastery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and at *Jacoubieh* the Monastery of Our Lady of Fatima.

The four reception centers are in *Damascus*, *Aleppo*, *Latakia* and *Knayeh*. They offer accommodation for around 200 people and each day provide for the needs of an additional 4,000. Here the most immediate needs of the weakest elements of the population are met, with beds offered in the facilities, and support provided to internally displaced persons in repairing their homes and seeking alternative housing solutions. The friars also provide food (offering meals in the centers and distributing food and other economic aid to families in various situations of distress), clothing, blankets and medical care.

LEBANON_ In Beirut is the seat of the Latin Apostolic Vicariate and the Monastery of St. Joseph.

At *Harissa-Jounieh* is the Monastery of St. Anthony of Padua and in Tripoli El Mina the Monastery of St. Francis and the Terra Sancta School At *Der Minas*, 90 km from Beirut at the southern limit of the country, is the Franciscan Parish where numerous Christian families from Qaraqosh, the largest Christian city in Iraq which last August fell into the hands of radical Islamists after weeks of resistance, have found refuge.

JORDAN_ At Madaba on Mount Nebo the Custody of the Holy Land is preserving one of the most highly visited archaeological sites in Jordan. The Monastery of the Memorial of Moses is located here. At *Amman* is the Terra Sancta College, an aid for families in conditions of instability and insecurity, for the development and education of young people who have grown up in a context of conflict, forced to flee from their native lands.

WHAT IS NEEDED

In Syria, in the most heavily-bombarded areas, in *Aleppo*, *Il Ram* and in the 5 villages of the Orontes Valley (*Knayeh*, *Yacoubieh*, *Jisser*, *Ghassanieh* and *Gidaideh*) **food, milk for children, and clothes.** But especially money to **pay for medicines, operations and medical care, for fixing provisionally houses damaged by shelling, for paying rents and at times for fleeing to the south.**

In *Damascus* (*Bab Touma* and *Salhie*) where the situation is calmer, funds are continually needed to ensure medical care, for purchasing milk, clothes, glasses and books, and **for covering school fees and scholarships.** It is necessary to find new housing and pay rents for families who do not have the means to do so themselves, all the more so since possibilities for finding work are very scarce. It is also necessary to buy mattresses and furniture for homes

At *Latakia* it is necessary to provide **all that is needed to accommodate the families fleeing from villages in the north.** Purchasing medicines, food and providing for school needs.

In Jordan and Lebanon it is necessary to support Syrian refugee families. In addition to food and medicines, money is required to **pay the rent of their homes and to buy transport tickets; aid is required to allow their children to go to schools and universities.** A new project of the Association is aimed spe-

cifically at ensuring the right to education for these young people who are living in refugee camps or are dispersed throughout the territory.

HOW TO SUPPORT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CUSTODY AND MAKE DONATIONS FOR SYRIA

Supporting Association pro Terra Sancta means aiding the Syrian population and giving concrete help to all the friars and religious who are living in Syria. Every contribution is essential.

The Association, a nonprofit NGO working in support of the Custody of the Holy Land, is at the center of coordination of Catholic humanitarian interventions in this country and the surrounding region where Syrian refugees have fled (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Cyprus and Egypt).

You can make a donation in either of the following ways:

ONLINE – credit card and PayPal

BANK TRANSFER – IBAN: IT67 W050 18121010 0000 0122691 BIC/Swift Code: CCRTIT2T84A

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