

THE THIRD CENTURY... AGAIN?



By Bro MARIANO DIVITO, OFM CAP.

The killing of the Jesuit missionary priest from the Netherlands Frans van der Lugt in the city of Homs and Pope Francis' words of condolence given during his General Audience on Wednesday 9 April, sparked off attention in the media again to the dramatic condition of Christians, in particular missionaries, who are living and risking their lives in Syria and other parts of the world that are in the prey of violence and persecution similar to that of the first centuries of the Church. In a thought-provoking article in the *Corriere della Sera* published a few days after the murder, Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Sant'Egidio lay community, brought up the fact that in the Middle East "the Islamists (but which?) still have as prisoners two bishops from Aleppo in Syria, Mar Yohanna Gregorios Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, an Italian Jesuit priest Paolo Dall'Oglio and two other priests," about whom we now hear almost nothing. And yet these two bishops have been held hostage for more

than a year. Andrea Riccardi has highlighted very well "the desperate situation in which Christians are living in Syria in the zones controlled by the fundamentalists."

A Syrian priest, who now resides in Lebanon, Nader Jbeil, in a recent visit to San Giovanni Rotondo, described how whole villages have been destroyed by groups of Islamist rebels, and the Christians decapitated by them and then how, out of contempt, their severed heads are kicked around like soccer balls.

And this situation of violence and persecution exists in Iraq, Nigeria, Cameroon, India and Vietnam too. We need only bear in mind that: "in 2013 alone a total of twenty priests and one sister were killed because of their faith and just in the first months of 2014 three priests have been killed. And amongst the Evangelicals during this same period 150 pastors, 500 preachers and 8000 faithful were killed."

"Today, in the 21st century, our Church is a Church of martyrs," the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, commented during a vigil organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio recalling similar words of Pope Francis.

Christians "are not being persecuted because they are vying for worldly, political, economic or military power," the Cardinal in charge of the Holy See's diplomatic relations affirmed, "but precisely because they are tenacious witnesses of another vision of life, one of abasement, service, freedom, which is based on faith".

In fact, "in those places where hatred seems to have poisoned all of existence, they have shown that love is more powerful than death" and they have testified to "the humble, peace-making strength of which they are bearers like so many volunteers both lay and religious, young and old, whose lives were ended while generously serving the Church and communicating the enthusiasm of charity." Because of this, and without spurning international aid in defence of life and the dignity and freedom of believers of all religions, we recognise the importance of these martyrs and their testimony in reawakening the faith in the many so-called "first world" countries where life seems safe and free, but where in reality the people are incapable of reasoning outside of the ideas imposed by the consumerist culture.

We are not back in the third century, that is certain. Nevertheless, the conviction of the Christians of that time expressed by Tertullian that "the blood of the martyrs is the life-giving seed for new Christians," is just as strong and vital in the 21st century as then.

Let us in this month of May, the month dedicated to the Virgin Mary, our universal mother, address our prayers to her. May she enlighten by her example of selfless and sacrificial love all mankind, victims as well as executioners.

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