

Humanitarian Assistance Team of Mother Agnes and the Monastery of St. James, Syria

Monday, November 11, 2013

God's universal title is "the most-Compassionate, the most-Merciful," as the poetic verses of the Koran tell us. The beautiful truth that Islam, Christianity, and all religions express is that we too are called to have compassion.



In Syria those who are suffering the most are often the unseen victims, the poor, the weak, the handicapped. These people are crying out for someone to "open their heart," to risk going and bringing them aid. One who responded to this cry was Mother Agnes Mariam of the Cross, the superior of the Monastery of St James in Qara, Syria – her name is well known for promoting "*mussalaha*" a grass-roots peace and reconciliation movement in Syria – less known perhaps is that she has established a "Humanitarian Assistance Team" a non-political organization to give aid to suffering Syrian civilians from all faiths.



This beautiful child needs a medical operation that his family cannot afford

For example, this Damascus family has two daughters and a son who are ill and bedridden, and mother herself cannot walk. They are “hidden victims” of the war. Mother Agnes and Sister Carmel came not only to visit them and give financial aid, but to ensure they can live a better life. She gave them new everything, new clothes, new beds, food, supplies, but most importantly medical care professionals who can come take care of them.



September 4, 2013: “Al-Qaeda-linked rebels,” reports AP, “launched an assault on a regime-held Christian mountain village ... of Maaloula... said a nun, speaking by phone from a convent in the village,” (Maaloula is the symbolic heart of Syrian Christianity because it is one of the few places still speaking Jesus’ language, Aramaic). In this attack all the Christian residents fled.



Robbed of all possessions, the refugees came to Damascus seeking the help of Mother Agnes, and our Catholic Melkite Patriarchate. Mother Agnes Mariam organized help for them and she encouraged them to never to give into despair or hatred, but remain in Syria. She also prayed with them that God may once again bless their ancient and beautiful village of Maaloula.



Mother Agnes speaking with victims of Maaloula at the Catholic Melkite Patriarchate, to offer them help in their crisis.

Meet the couple that is spearheading the humanitarian team organized by Mother Agnes: Zacky and Sylvie, dear friends of the Monastery. Sylvie is a French teacher, and in peace time Zacky was the monastery's architect/engineer, but now they have volunteered to be our "guardian angels" to bring aid to the suffering.



Zacky and Sylvie bring humanitarian funds to a family of 12 refugees from Ghouta, trying to survive in tiny room in a factory (above). The room has no shower so they have to go to grandmother's house to wash up. Their toilet has no flowing water, and rain falls on their heads. Some children are sick due to terrible conditions.



The humanitarian team visits a little boy who needs another operation on his legs. His dear father has eyes that are wounded, and his poor mother has brain cancer. This little boy really fell in love with 'uncle' Zacky. Zacky and Sylvie gave a donation from the team to cover medical expenses.



Here the team gives presents to young girl with disabilities. Sylvie became great friends with her during her visit, and the girl is so happy to have made a new friend – she is crying with joy! "O God, you make our souls so beautiful when we share your love!"



This tiny room is the "home" for the three refugee families, 14 people. While the women sleep in the room the men are outside, and vice versa. Life is terribly hard for them, here the team gave them financial assistance for a new home.



The miracle of their work is that Zacky and Sylvie themselves are poor, they live in a small apartment in Jeramana, a Christian suburb that suffers constant bombings from the extremist rebels. Sylvie can no longer teach at their son's school; it has been bombed, students were killed, some teachers and the principle were blown away. Such random violence against civilians is considered a 'win-win' situation for the al-Qaeda-affiliated 'rebels,' who seek to gain a foothold in central Damascus, and at the same time destroy a neighborhood of defenseless Christians and other minorities who will not fight back.

For Zacky and Sylvie every day they leave the house not knowing if they will come back. Despite this they have decided to help people who are suffering even worse than them.



A woman with cancer, very poor, Zacky and the team visit her to give much needed money an operation and organize medical care.

The humanitarian team feels God protection is miraculous – and they have expressed to me their incredible joy: “This is the team of love and peace for all Syrians, thanks be to God, thanks be to Mother Agnes, thanks be to your prayers – because our humble work is the result of prayers of many people.”

The Humanitarian Assistance Team wears the armor of love, inspired by the words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you”.

This team has made an amazing discovery: when we work to help the poor, we discover that the poor enrich us far more than we could ever enrich them. You can help these poor people physically, but they give you the priceless gift of joy, love, and friendship – and it is through them that God showers blessings on the whole world. For Jesus said: “Whatsoever you do to the least of these my brethren, you do to me.” This is the divine economy, in Biblical terms:

“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (St James 2:5).

We have forgotten that the riches of God’s Kingdom *belongs to the poor*. To those who we see as poor and forgotten, God has entrusted his heavenly kingdom—it is they who are rich and we who are poor. This is not the wisdom of the world, this is the eternal wisdom our heavenly Father. Even as Jesus Christ said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for *YOURS IS* the Kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). God opens this Kingdom to us when we open our hearts to them. As Christ teaches: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you

gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me...' (Mt 25:34-36). Jesus teaches in the same passage that if we shut our hearts to the poor, naked, hungry, prisoners—we are shutting our heart to God, and shutting the gates of heaven.

Here are some other miracles that Mother Agnes' humanitarian team has participated in recently:



Zacky holds up a boy who has retardation, and his family spends the night in a car wash. Now they have money for an apartment.



In this terrible war some families have virtually no way to survive without assistance.



A family survives in a room where toilet, shower, sink, kitchen are in the same tiny place, Zacky told me, "Even a dog in America couldn't live like this."



These poor babies have a terminal illness, the team helped them by making sure they receive dignified care.



Here the team gives medicine to very poor man with no family, but who is very weak and sick and cannot walk.



Mother Agnes' foundation here gives money for the dignified burial of a Syrian victim.

(Some of the health cases were so bad, we could not show them here because the images were too graphic)

At Jesus' humble birth the heavens opened and the angels began singing: "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men". If the angels are singing it we can too! We see that the glory of God is already shining in the hearts of those who love humanity and who are building Syria up, not tearing her down. God's mercy and compassion is expressed to us in the gift of Himself, the gift of life. Into this broken world of violence God gave the greatest gift: the gift of a Savior, the Prince of Peace, the beloved Son. By giving ourselves in love, we give Christ to those who suffer:

"My peace I give to you" Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God" (Jn 14:27, Mt 5:9).

In their humanitarian work Mother Agnes' team has discovered paradise on earth, the invitation to the joy of God's kingdom. Zacky and his family tried to explain this ineffable joy to me: "Without prayer these miracles cannot happen. I give thanks to God, thanks to Mother Agnes, and from the bottom of my heart I kiss you. I bless you in Jesus name."

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