



Christmas Greetings 2013

Syria in the heart of the world

With broken heart and tear-filled eyes I am writing this letter to my dear friends!

This is the third year of the crisis in Syria that is affecting the whole world.

On Great and Holy Friday I wrote a letter to the Holy Father Francis, in which I told him that he was following the Way of the Cross for two hours in the Coliseum, but we in Syria and the Arab world have been treading a “harsh, bloody, painful long Way of the Cross ...for more than two years now.” We needed someone, **him**, to be precise, to bear the cross with us.

It so happened that I received no reply, though from the beginning of his pontificate the Holy Father had repeatedly mentioned Syria as “beloved Syria” at the Angelus and on other occasions.

Then, at the peak of the crisis in August 2013, the Holy Father launched his unique, impressive, strong appeal to the world: “No military attack against Syria, but rather a challenge for the whole world to fast, pray and love Syria.”

And the whole world - Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and various Protestant groups, the World Council of Churches, NGOs, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists - all heard the Holy Father’s voice and followed him.

Shortly thereafter Ma’alula, a symbol of Christian tradition and presence in Syria for two thousand years, fell to an attack from insurgents.

Through this attack Syria came to the world’s attention, mainly due to three factors:

1. The threat of a worldwide attack on Syria
2. The fall of Ma’alula as a cry to the world’s conscience
3. The Holy Father’s appeal for prayer and fasting for peace in Syria, the Middle East (Palestine) and the whole world.

In this way a wonderful change occurred, which calmed the whole scene and the storm.

It reminded me of the storm on the Sea of Galilee in Palestine, when Jesus came and quietened the storm. This time our Pope Francis came, prayed, fasted and calmed the storm.

The whole Church and even the whole world joined him on the way of peace and rebuilding a better future for young generations in Syria and the whole Middle East.

Dear friends, I extend to you the same appeal as I did to Francis, to bear Syria’s cross with us. Help bring Syria on the way to the joyful morning of the resurrection.

On 18 September 2013 I was invited to an assembly of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. During this assembly, I made the following suggestions:

1. Start a broad campaign at local, regional and global levels.
2. Advocate no military strike, no weapons supply, no terror, and no war.

3. Appeal rather for reconciliation, dialogue, peace.
4. Pave the way for Geneva II, for diplomatic negotiations to end the crisis in Syria.
5. More common efforts to continue Christian-Muslim living together in the Middle East. That is the condition for genuine global Muslim-Christian dialogue.

That is the future that we long for and those are the guidelines that enable us not to allow the flame of hope to be extinguished.

Thus the flame of hope may be rekindled in Syria, the Middle East and the world, as the Holy Father reminded us, when he said, "Do not allow the flame of hope to be extinguished in your hearts."

Dear friends, I wish for you to enjoy peace in your families, villages, cities and countries and this especially at Christmastide and throughout the New Year 2014.

Thank you for your assistance, your donations, enabling us to alleviate the suffering of people (some eight million) in Syria and your solidarity.

Merry Christmas and blessed New Year 2014!

+ Gregorios III

Patriarch