

Testimony in Rimini

First I want to thank the group who invited me for this meeting.

There is no more beautiful thing to start our evening than a prayer dedicated to the persecuted Christians, especially in Syria, as the Holy Father when he asked worldwide a day of prayer and fast for Syria, Saturday 7 September 2013. Tonight you also do the same thing for my country, which suffers from approximately five and a half years for this war that has made so many victims among the civilian population. The only crime of these people, that they were in their house or working on the road. You have started this on this square so simply. I really like this simplicity and sensitivity. Let me tell you how things are going in Syria.

We Christians, in Syria, before this terrible war we were the 9% of population, whereas now we are only 5%, because many Christians have left for Europe, United States, Canada, Latin America. They are now scattered around the world, they have started a new life and they will no longer return in the Middle East, even when this war will be over. Other countries of the Middle East are slowly emptying of Christians and yet this is the Holy Land where our Savior is born to bring peace to the entire world. The ISIS Group has entered a town called Rhaka, on the border with Iraq, where many Christian families were unable to escape, and they have been forced to pay a tax, because of their only crime, and only one, of being Christians and not Muslims.

They no longer can go to church and pray, or bring the cross around his neck or put it in the churches. These armed groups have turned Churches in offices for them and for those who want to become a Muslim. All women are forced to dress like Muslim women, with black dress covering them from head to toe; and there is another solution, unless they manage to escape out of the ISIS area. There are also other terrorist groups, such Alkaeda and Alnusra, who massacred seven priests, Catholic and Orthodox. One of them, a Jesuit, in a city called Homes, hosted inside his monastery many refugees, Christian and Muslims. Another priest paid one of these groups, as they had asked them, to release a parishioner. They have abducted two Orthodox bishops who are still prisoners for over three years, then two priests and a nun. They took another 12 nuns for 3 months and then issued them. They have destroyed many ancient monasteries and more than 65 churches. They stole all the ancient objects there were inside. When they enter in a new area, first they ask for money to free people, but after that they took the money, they kill or cut off their heads. When they entered in an area near Damascus, called Haddra, they killed the men, then they took all the women and they obliged to walk on the roads to get to another area, naked with nothing, even without shoes. Then they sold them in the slave market to other groups like them; Some of these women are Christian, the other belonged to a religion called Alahuit, the religion of President of Syria. They also occupied the outskirts of Damascus. From 4 years every day they have been launching rockets in Damascus and so many people die in the street or at home or in hospital or church or school. I remember a little girl of about nine years, who had gone to school, but then came a rocket into the school and this child, was injured. I visited her at hospital: she has lost her feet. She asked: "Why has God done this to me? I love God, and this year I'm getting ready to make his first communion. I want walk! Maybe God does not love me? ". This is her question. There is not a Christian family who has a martyr or a family member kidnapped or seriously injured. For this reason, all the Christian areas where ISIS or other groups has entered are almost empty of Christians, although before the majority of this area were Christians. They say that Christians of Europe and other parts of the world have forgotten them and have forgotten this Holy Land, where the martyrs of the first centuries have left to bring Christianity worldwide.

Now I want to tell you about some Christian families in Syria personally known.

A family of the city of Homms, the center of the country, has become Muslim to save their lives, because the terrorists have threatened them: or became Muslim or they would have killed the head of the family and their sons, then they would have taken his wife and daughters and then raped. In fact, when the terrorists come into a city or a village, take men and kill them, then kill women over 65, while rape the youngsters. And if a woman does not accept, he dies soon. Then they bring most of them to the slaves market and sell them to other terrorist groups.

There are, however, Christians who do not deny their faith and die for this.

Three young people from a village called Mahlula, 50 km from Damascus, where they speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus, didn't agreed to deny their Christian faith and then they died one after another. Now my Church wants to send a file to the Vatican to study this at the Congregation of Saints, and it has appointed me Curator. They are the new martyrs of our faith.

Now I speak of what happened to my relatives.

My cousin was abducted from his parents' house at 6am together together with his brother. They took them to a prison for a bit of time and then they separated them. After 2 years and 2 months, they released my cousin, who was back home to his parents, while we know nothing about the other, while already two years and a half have passed. I have spoken with my cousin on the phone, and he told me how they treated badly. He and his brother were civilians, not soldiers, they previously worked for a private company. Even today he wakes up continuously at night and starts screaming as he still think to be among terrorists. In fact, the terrorists never leave sleep prisoners nighttime. He was previously very robust; but he's back very skinny. He said that he so often thought that his hour had come, so he began to pray Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and other prayers. Many times they threatened him with death to deny the Christian faith, but he refused, then they given the Koran and forced him to learn it all by heart. When they did a test: he must recite the Koran without forgetting even a word; for any mistake they tortured him. They also obliged to pray five times a day as Muslims do.

Once the terrorists allowed him to talk on the phone with his married brother and said that I, Father Ihab, had to talk immediately with all the bishops of Damascus, so they would have convinced the Syrian government not to bomb the terrorists. Another time they recorded a video where he was along with other prisoners and they put on the Internet; They forced him to make an appeal to the Holy Father for convince the Syrian government not to bomb the terrorists.

When back home, his parents lead him to the hospital for a complete control, because people who are kidnapped eat very little and work from morning till evening without rest: they dig tunnel for terrorists. Then he slowly healed and returned to normal life.

For this reason, many families have fled the country to seek a better future and to live in peace: Many families have escaped only with the dresses they were wearing when terrorists arrived, and left everything to save their children and their life. That is why since a long time each family of Damascus has already packed a small suitcase which documents and money, some medicine and change of clothes, so as to be ready to run immediately. Two years ago, at night, about 3.30, I got up because I heard someone shouting and heard shoots no more than 200 meters far from my window. In fact, a person belonging to a terrorist group managed to arrive close to our Patriarchate where I was sleeping. I remember that I dressed quickly and I went out in the hallway because it

was safer and I found them three other priests. We remained in the dark about 15 minutes, then everything got back quietly. Despite all these sufferings, churches in Damascus are full of worshipers, especially for Sunday Mass. there is always the danger of rockets and there are many civilians who die on the roads as they go to church or to work. I want to conclude by recalling the words that the Holy Father said in his wishing sent to the world on the Easter day of this year: "We remember our brothers and sisters who are persecuted for the faith and for their loyalty to the name of Christ, and in front of the evil that seems to have the best in life of so many people, let us listen again the consoling words of the Lord: "Do not be afraid! I have overcome the world! ".