



# Letter to the People of God

## Of H.L. Mgr. Mario Grech

### Bishop of Gozo

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## Syria “Laboratory of Cruelty”

Some people might have thought that the UN was greatly exaggerating when it described the current war in Syria, and more exactly in East Ghouta close to Damascus, as “hell on earth”. But what else can one say at the sight of the scenes of devastation caused by the bombardments and the chemical attacks on civilians,! The number of dead and wounded is continually growing. I read that the wave of attacks happening now is the most severe in the last few years! Pope Francis has named Syria a “laboratory of cruelty”.

The seriousness of these attacks is aggravated because whoever is attacking is totally ignoring the UN Security Council, which on 24<sup>th</sup> February passed and approved a resolution in favour of a ceasefire. Because of the battle several corridors used for providing humanitarian assistance to the civilian population, that has been living under siege for the past five years, have been closed. To make things even worse, the BBC has recently reported that some UN operators have been caught sexually abusing some women approaching them to beg for food or other humanitarian assistance. These women, who needed to obtain for themselves and their families what is theirs by right, were humiliated by being asked to give sexual services!

The situation in Syria continues to become more complicated because many people are abandoning their country. In fact, up to now 12 million have escaped and this is creating a social crisis. I have read that 80% of doctors and health specialists have abandoned the country and 60% of the war injured are dying through lack of available medical attention. Some time ago I heard Bishop Samir Nassar, who is responsible for the Maronite Christian community in Damascus, say that last year they had only ten marriages and seven christenings, while in 2016 they had thirty weddings and forty baptisms. What future can Christians have in Syria?

This picture, by itself, must instil in us not only sadness but also anxiety, because such type of behaviour exhibits how prone man is to become a wolf preying on other humans! However, it is a curious fact and also worrying that we have Damascus burning up by the minute and many have no interest at all in this dramatic event. I find it very strange that currently one sees thousands of people in our society concentrating on preparations for Good Friday, while ignoring the calvary evolving in Damascus, where crosses are constantly being erected to crucify innocent people. If this is true, we have a serious contradiction!

The vast destruction of humanity like that in Syria caused Pope Francis to go beyond the traditional teaching of the Church about war. From the time of St. Augustine (in the fourth Century) the Church has spoken about “the just war” – teaching which is also found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 2309). Pope Francis in the interview book (*Politique et Societe*, 2017) with the sociologist Dominique Wolton, says that “just war” does not exist. “In political philosophy we learned that to defend oneself one can go to war. But can one speak of a just war? Can one make war to defend? There is only one thing that is just: peace!” The expression “tooth for a tooth” does not make sense! Because calumny generates further calumnies, a conflict causes other conflicts, and violence brings only more

violence. Considering that even today we still hear that there are those who use war as a threatening argument, I appeal to the political authorities to commit themselves to delegitimize war.

Therefore, I accept with pleasure the news of last Monday when the Russian President, supported by the USA and the European Community, asked for a ceasefire for five hours every day to permit humanitarian assistance to reach Ghouta and allow the evacuation of civilians trapped in the war zone. One hopes that those parties involved in this war have the sense to realise what a high price is being paid in this fight.

I make my own the emotional appeal of the Ecumenical Council of Churches (CeC) of the 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2018: “We pray God to console those who lost their loved ones in the war. We are in solidarity with the Syrian population that is passing through great suffering and we hope that their wishes to obtain freedom and human dignity come to fruition, through a political process under the auspices of the United Nations and that in agreement with the resolution of the Security Council, this absurd war comes to an end.”

I salute those Syrians in our country, while I appreciate those who received them and offered them help. I encourage our Christian communities to offer signs, even small ones, of love to these brethren. Because, although they are physically in our country, it is certain that their mind is heavy and their hearts wounded by the atrocious suffering of their families, friends and compatriots.

Given from the Bishop’s Curia, Victoria, Gozo, today Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2018.

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