

Roy Moussalli testimony

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Deus Caritas Est Congress

“Love Never Fails”

Dear brothers and sisters, Your Eminence, Your Excellency,

I am honoured to be amongst you today participating in the theological and pastoral reflection and celebration of God’s Love expressed in a special way in this encyclical.

My name is Roy Moussalli, and I come from Damascus. It could seem that it is a priority for me to stay in Damascus those few days with all the needs in the field, however the sharing of the word, our shared prayer and liturgy and our fellowship and reflection together on God and his manifestations are vital for me and for our diakonia.

I was born in Damascus, have made my studies in between Damascus and Beirut, graduating from the American university of Beirut in the field of Engineering. Two years after graduation during the civil war in Lebanon, I had to make an important decision in my life then, and after a long discernment, I had peace to go back to Syria, to finish the military service and “submit myself to every human authority for the Lord's sake” as St Peter asks in his first epistle. This was my option if I wanted to be available to serve my people. My other option would have been to emigrate like all the other good Christians to Canada or the USA or Australia...This erosion is continuing and increasing amongst Christians and others

Today I am still in Syria, my family is split between Beirut Lebanon and Damascus Syria, and I lead a local organisation I have helped found, the Syrian Society for Social Development know as SSSD.

SSSD comprises of a team of almost 1500 staff and volunteers, 300 of them are full time paid staff, working in 8 governorates in Syria, serving more than

200,000 persons per year, in various sectors of Psychosocial support, education, shelter rehabilitation, vocational training, small business projects and health. Protection is our main focus, with child protection, gender based violence and legal documentation support being our core activities. Our target group are the most marginalized populations; juvenile offenders, unaccompanied or separated children, persons with disabilities, working children and those that have dropped out from school, abused and at risk children and women, and other persons and communities that have been displaced or affected by the crisis that has been going on for the last five years in Syria.

We work in collective shelters (usually schools transformed in shelters), community centres, and protection centres (for juveniles or Person With Disability) in almost 100 locations in Syria.

Many of our team have themselves been affected or displaced from their homes, and some have been displaced several times. (One out of 2 Syrian has been displaced and lost his home). Many have lost dear ones because of the fighting. Some have taken refuge in neighbouring countries, some made it to Europe (almost 40 of our volunteers) , and some could not make to Europe and drowned in the sea trying to make their way out of Syria. (Our friend Samir a volunteer from Hassakeh, had to flee his town when Daesh invaded it. When they came back, his daughter had been traumatized by the experience and could not bear any sound of fire arms. They decided to take her away to safer land and drowned with his daughter away from the places that have traumatized her). Some team members have lost their lives during this war inside Syria. I cannot remember all of them!

In our region, what is happening seems to be part of the usual history. On my father's side, his family was displaced from North Syria, now in south Turkey during the genocide against Armenians and Syrians. This is a state of mind whereby the other and different is rejected and expelled. This is ongoing today.

With no abundance of Love or even an experience of it, fear seems to be a predominant feeling.

My mother was born on the street called straight in Damascus, in a house few hundred meters from Ananias' house. That tradition is very different from my father's. It is a tradition where communities of different faiths, Muslim Christians and Jews have lived together in harmony for many centuries. It is a tradition based on a transforming experience of persons and relationships, it is based on the Damascene experience, an experience of embracing the other and the different, an embrace of the different, a celebration of the differences, of love that never fails.

It is very indicative that the encyclical was published on the feast of the conversion of St Paul. Saul the persecutor was feared, and The fear of him was significant, and those beyond the borders of Palestine trembled at the mention of the name of this "wolf" who stalked "the fold of the Lamb".

Saul said "I would hunt them down even in distant cities. (Acts 26:11)

Saul was not very different from the terrorists of today. Now not only you hear about them, but you see them, and this is very sad!

We, in Damascus have been very impacted and influenced by the encounter of Paul and Ananias. When Ananias shares the events, he says "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name." Act 9:13-14

"Putting his hands on him (on Saul), immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized."

We in Damascus are very touched by the symbolism carried by Paul's experience

Paul in his words gives a slight touch and says that "A certain Ananias, who was a devout man with respect to the Law and who was highly regarded by all the Jews living there, came to me. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul,

receive your sight!' At that moment I could see **him**". Act 22:12 -13 I COULD SEE HIM

It was not a question of regaining his sight. The transformation was that the prosecutor who was not able to see and accept the other was transformed by the Love of God shown thru the unconditional love and acceptance of the persecuted who was Ananias. An edifying model, but a challenging call.

Paul and his mission were crucial in the edification of the church. The model of Ananias in his faithfulness, his trust and his Agape was instrumental in defining the course and the soul of the church. Ananias is a model for us in those troubled times where affliction and persecution are becoming a norm. He is an inspiration challenging us to abide by the love of God, extending our hand to the persecutor, to the different, extending our hand over him and embracing him. It is our call; in the Middle East it is our destiny!

Our fears as Christians have led us to erecting walls of protection under various excuses. Some are very relevant. We might have two tendencies that are pitfalls; either of retracting in our shell or to live charity as an act of giving. Showing how wonderful we are.

In SSSD, our local NGO in Syria, we have chosen to create the space that each one can consider his, appropriate for himself, a space where each one comes from different religious, cultural and ethnical backgrounds, fulfilling his call and growing with the others.

It is always a challenge of living charity and at the same time be nourished by it, give love and receive love.

In the relief and humanitarian efforts in the Syrian and other crisis in the world, there is a focus on self-care, the need for relief workers to take a cut time from the field and rest. In our Christian and other religious approaches prayer is concretely and urgently needed. In a deeper step, the encyclical stresses beautifully the fact that to become a source of Love, one must constantly drink anew from the original source. Which is Jesus Christ FROM WHOSE PIERCED HEART FLOWS THE LOVE OF GOD.,. The encyclical later

continues to clarify that only in the light of contemplation, will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own.

In Syria, in our work with the vulnerable, the juveniles, the prisoners, the persons with disability, and now in the crisis with all those afflicted by it, broken and lost, we are coming to the realisation that we have to be able to get renewed, inspired by ongoing contemplations and thru contemplation understand the experiences we go thru with the broken, discovering the hidden Godly presence.

Jean Vanier and Ron Nikkel, two men and prophets of the modern times have been inspirations and mentors to me and helped in the development and growth of our ministry.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche and Faith & Light and with whom I have worked for the last 30 years around persons with disabilities their friends and family members, has helped me deepen our experiences and understand how God has chosen the foolish things of the world and the weak to confound the wise and the strong. A pierced heart shows the love of God, a crucified hanging body on the cross, completely disabled and dying, gives life. A disfigured face shows beauty and reveals beauty.

In a process similar to our reflection in this congress we try to go at SSSD, thru a process we call spiritual formation where we try to contemplate and dwell on those experiences, describe them and verbalise them so we can discover God revealed to us in the poor, the weak, and the crucified.

Ron Nikkel has been president of Prison Fellowship international for 35 years; I have worked with him for 13 years, and he has helped understand thru his experience in more than 2000 prisons in 120 countries, and thru our work, the meaning and implications of Mathew 25, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.

I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me."

Our contemplation is helping in discovering that **He** is revealed in the hearts and the lives and the distress of the people.

The Prison Fellowship ministry of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt has even taken the name “Jesus the prisoner” underlying the fact that too often, we go, serve and perform an act of charity in the name of Jesus at the time when he “(made himself of no reputation, and) **took upon him the form of a servant**, (and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man), **he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross**”. Php 2:7-8

Sharing and walking in this discovery journey and process all of us, from the various religious and cultural backgrounds, is a gift we have been given in the midst of the most complicated and challenging times. For us it is a miracle.

In our world of division, we have been called to help in the restoration of lives and the rebuilding of communities. Especially with juveniles, we have developed programs that are based on the restorative justice approach. We have used programs developed jointly with the centre for justice and reconciliation. A victim empathy program developed and used within SSSD is based on the Sycamore tree project, based on the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, the corrupt tax collector who promised to repay the people he had extorted. This program brings groups of victims into prisons to meet with groups of "unrelated" offenders. Juvenile offenders discuss issues related to crime and discover the impact of crime on themselves, on their victims, on their respective families and on the community and society in general, clearly decreasing recidivism.

It was important and important for us SSSD, to develop and promote restorative justice in criminal justice systems, as it is an important contemporary expression of biblical standards of justice. While operating within the Christian tradition, there is common ground and collaboration with people from all backgrounds and traditions.

This restorative justice approach included mediation programs and other various programs like circles of support and accountability to help released juveniles in aftercare programs.

This has been achieved with a lot of success at the individual level. Now with the crisis, we have a mission of creating spaces where persons of various communities that have been separated by reasons due to the conflict can come together rediscovering their common humanity, realising that we have all been impacted, we all have been hurt and broken.

One program we are developing and implementing at a pilot stage targeting those affected by the crisis is to address the prevention of the propagation of violence so each one is not taken into that cycle of violence but can accept the risk of dying to aggressiveness and rivalry in order to discover a new freedom and a new fecundity thru dialogue. Those little and nascent experiences we have seen are very encouraging and prepare us for much needed and greater work in dialogue and reconciliation.

Jean Vanier in his book *“From Brokenness to Community”* says that “We give dignity to each other by the way we listen to each other, in a spirit of trust and dying to oneself so that the other may live, grow and give”.

By the way we are listening to the broken and to the wounded and creating this space we are able to introduce a spirit and a culture of acknowledging the other and different, of listening to each other leading to an acceptance. This is a long journey to Agape, but we believe in what we have seen and experienced, and are confident that He is leading us in preparing the ways of the Lord.

To conclude, I again thank you for including me and what I represent in this important journey in the Church and its reflection and deepening on God and his loving nature; and I thank you and thank our Holy Father, Pope Francis for his message to the workers of the Syrian and Iraqi crisis humanitarian worker of his profound proximity and solidarity with all those in this hardship and suffering from the tragical consequences of this crisis.

We are concerned for our beloved land, and the safety and resiliency of our people, but there is no fear from whoever (even from people like Saul), there is no fear in Love, There is no fear in Him.

In Him, there is only a healing love, and love for all, as love never fails.

Thank you

Roy Moussalli