

The Blue Marists of Aleppo

(updated October 2022)

Background

For eleven years now, the war has been going on in Syria; And this, to the detriment of the Syrians who saw their country destroyed, its economy wiped out, its patrimony plundered, its élite exiled, its wealth stolen; without forgetting the 450,000 deaths, the 4.5 million refugees in neighboring countries, the one million migrants to western countries and the 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In Aleppo, the 2nd city in Syria and its economic capital, the situation was catastrophic. In July 2012, the rebels armed groups, affiliated to Al Nosra, branch of Al Qaida, invaded the East and South neighborhoods of Aleppo causing, in few days, the displacement of 500,000 people who fled and took refuge in West Aleppo under the control of the Syrian government. During 4 and half years, Aleppo was divided in two: The East neighborhoods with 250,000 people living there under the rebels control and the remaining neighborhoods, called West Aleppo, with 1.5 million people living there under government control. For 4 and half years, West Aleppo was surrounded by the rebels, submitted many times to complete blockade. The Alepines lived three years without water nor electrical power, the pumping stations and power plants being in the rebels controlled area. A rain of mortar shells and gas canister filled with nails launched by the rebels fell every day on Aleppo killing dozens of persons and wounding as many. The Syrian army tried few times to take the control of the rebels controlled area by ground battles and air strikes without success.

Finally, Aleppo was liberated on December 22, 2016. The armed terrorist groups were evacuated to a close province, Idlib, under the rebels control and Aleppo was reunified under the control of the Syrian state.

If the people of Aleppo are relieved by the end of fights, they know, however, that the Peace was not yet implemented in Syria. The north-west of Syria is occupied

by the turkish army; the north-east is occupied, for one part by the turkish army and for another part by the kurd militia supported by the american army; the Idlib province is still occupied by the islamist-terrorist groups; and the peace talks are at standstill.

Six years after the liberation and reunification of Aleppo, only a minority of the displaced people who lived in the East and South neighborhoods and who fled after the rebels' invasion, returned back home. In spite of the huge work done by the authorities, restoration of these neighborhoods will take years.

Life in Syria is currently very difficult. After the military bomb, it is now the poverty bomb that exploded in Syria.

Currently, the economic situation is very dramatic. The cost of living is very very high; Unemployment reaches 50% of the population, 60% of the families are in food insecurity, 82 % of the families live under the poverty threshold and survive thanks to aids provided by several NGOs.

Because of 11 years of war and the sanctions imposed on Syria and the Syrians, there is a shortage and thus rationing of many essential products: the gas (20 liters per vehicle per 15 days), the fuel (none; we are very cold in winter), the bread, the electrical power (3 hours per day) etc....

It is in this context that we, the Blue Marists, live.

"The Blue Marists" is a group of religious brothers and lay Marists inspired by Marist spirituality and charisma of St. Marcellin Champagnat, to live the Gospel in everyday life with simplicity, modesty and humility. This group is made up of a direction team consisting of one Marist Brother and 8 lay (5 women and 3 men) and 150 volunteers and employees. Under the name of "The Ear of God", we took in charge, since 1986, the poorest of the poor Christian families of Aleppo by supporting and assisting in the area of housing, education, health and job.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Aleppo, in July 2012, we changed our name to be "the Blue Marists " and we have expanded our scope to include (in addition to the poorest families) thousands of displaced families, Christian and Muslim. The motto of the Blue Marists is: "to live in solidarity with the poorest to alleviate the suffering, develop the Human et sow Hope".

During 10 years, we have organized our action and activities around three axes:

The aid and relief programs

1- The Blue Marist Program for the displaced families

This is our relief program for 1000 displaced families. During 6 years, we have distributed monthly food parcels to help them survive. We stopped the program at the end of 2018 believing that it was time for them to be independent of the NGOs support. However, considering the very bad economic condition, we have resumed the distribution in November 2020.

In addition, funded by two international christian associations, we offer to the displaced families housing (paying the rent of their apartments until they are able to go back to their home) and we give cash money to hundreds displaced families in need.

2- The Blue Marists Medical Program

Because of poverty, unemployment and the incredible increase of the cost of living, the people of Aleppo have not anymore, the means to be treated adequately if they are sick or if they need surgery; medical insurance, Medicaid or Medicare do not exist in Syria. The program helps about 150 sick people in need, every month, to pay lab tests, X-ray, drug prescriptions, hospitalization and surgical procedures.

3- "Drop of Milk"

Consists of a monthly distribution of powdered milk to 3000 children under 11 years of age and special milk formula for infants under 1-year-old.

4- “Sharing Bread”

is a project for our seniors. The aim is to provide a hot meal with bread and fruit for 250 elderly people living alone, with no family left in Syria and no one to help them, some bedridden and most of them sick. A team of 14 cooks prepare meals in our premises that 29 of our young volunteers distribute every noon. With the meal, our volunteers offer these people a presence, a listening ear and a smile.

We found out that many of these old people living alone need, in addition to the meals, some help to clean their homes, to take a bath, to change the diaper etc. That is why Sharing Bread has now a child: “Care for the Elderly” which take care of these different needs.

The educational programs:

The principal mission of the Marists is the education of children, especially the least favored; therefore, we have developed our pedagogic activities to respond to the immense needs created by the war.

1-« I want to learn »

It takes place every morning from 9 am to 1 pm with 110 children from displaced families. It serves children of preschool age, from 2 and half to 6 y/o, by education, instruction and hygiene.

2- “Seeds”

is our psycho-social support and mental health program for individuals and groups. A team of 30 volunteers under the guidance of a psychologist cares for children (Lotus program), adolescents (Bamboo program), and adults for psychological care. Six hundred people benefit from this project.

3- “Marists Institute for Training” (M.I.T.)

Is our adult education center which started at the end of 2013. Over nine years, we have organized 162 twelve- hours workshops, in which 2048 people participated and were led by 28 trainers. In addition, we have organized 29 sessions of 20 to 56 hours to teach 580 young adults “how to start your own

project”. We will continue these sessions about the same theme in order to give to as many young people as possible the chance to learn how to create their own business.

4- “Cut and Sew”

It aims to teach the skills of sewing to young women, mothers and spouses of the displaced families, to help them find a job or for personal reason.

5- “Hope”

Consists of teaching English to young mothers who have children in elementary schools. Learning English being mandatory from 1st grade, the program will enable the mothers to follow their children in their homework.

The human development programs:

We believe that reconstruction should not be limited to rebuild the infrastructure and the buildings. The priority is to reconstruct the Human being, in allowing people to live with dignity and find a job.

1- “Heart Made”

It consists in recycling remain of fabrics to transform them into unique and fashionable pieces and sells them for self-financing. It aims to provide job opportunity for women and to respect environment and fight fabric and clothes waste. Sixteen women work in this project.

2- “Micro-projects” Program:

Aims to make the families independent from the aids received from NGOs, to enable them to live with dignity from the fruit of their labor and job. It consists of teaching, during a 20 to 56 hours’ session, to 20 adults per session how to create their own project. The best projects in term of feasibility, sustainability and

profitability are financed by us. In six years, we have organized 29 sessions and financed 231 micro-projects which have given jobs to more than 600 families.

3- Vocational training program

We found out that many candidates to our micro-projects program are illiterates, have limited academic education and lack qualification. We decided to start this program in order to teach people a job. Candidates will learn a job in working with a professional as apprentice (plumber, electrician, car mechanical, painter, mobile repair etc.). At the end of a one to two-year training period, we finance the candidates in opening their business. We have now 40 young people in apprenticeship.

4- “Women development program”

Takes in charge illiterate or vulnerable women and participates in their development and promotion by the mean of workshops and interactive sessions.

We have closed 4 programs because “their raison d’être” do not exist anymore.

« **War- wounded civilians** » project treated (gratuitously) the civilians affected by war wounds (bullets, shrapnel...). In five years, we have treated thousands of injured people and saved the life of dozens.

“**I am thirsty**” program which distributed water to the beneficiary families of our different programs as water supply to a city of 1.5 million of inhabitants was interrupted during 3 years.

“**Colibri**” project took in charge, during 4 years, 140 displaced Kurds families who fled from Afrin after the Turkish invasion in March 2018. They live in the Shahba camp 40 Km to the north-west of Aleppo.

“**I learn to Grow**” program served children of preschool age, from 2 and half to 6 y/o, by education, instruction and hygiene. The project took place every afternoon from 4 to 7 pm with 80 children from poor families

We would like to emphasize that our various programs are all directed to disadvantaged and/or displaced families and are entirely free.

Our spirituality

We believe that evangelism is not done by speeches but by everyday life and example. We endorse what His Holiness Pope Francis said on July 5, 2014 "The witness of charity is the royal road of evangelization". The Pope asked the Church to "infuse in the society the supplement of spirit that gives hope." Indeed, our motto is that of all the Marist World: **Sow Hope**.

We **support** the families, we want to listen to them, to provide psychological support, to understand their needs, to restore their dignity that is often flouted, to give them a little bit of hope and make them feel that we are in solidarity with them.

Compassion is one of our values. We share the suffering of our brothers and sisters, their distress, their despair and their tragedies.

Solidarity is our way of living charity and love with them and for them.

We want to prepare the future, work for reconciliation, reconstruction and Peace

Nabil Antaki

For the Blue Marists