

# LATIN PARISH ST. FRANCIS ASSISE

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## **Lenten letter to friends: in the footsteps of St. Joseph in Aleppo**

The current situation, in which the Covid-19 virus is continuing to spread, has created more barriers that greatly affect our journeys, including my personal desire to go to each of you to greet you and inform you about our life and mission in Aleppo. With a limited number of words, I am trying to overcome physical barriers to reach your hearts.

I feel joy that the Letter of *Patris Corde*, dedicated to the figure of St. Joseph, and which Pope Francis gave Christianity, marked our path very much both for us – the friars and the parish community. So, inspired by the Letter, but even more by the exemplar of the great Saint Joseph and the "culture of caring" (*World Day of Peace Message*), I will try to tell you about the arduous path of caring for the needy that we, as Franciscans in Aleppo, try to do every day.

How not to associate "care" for the other with the name of St. Joseph - the one who reflected the care of the Eternal Father for his Son Jesus and his Mother, chosen by God? For us, Franciscan friars, sent as priests and brothers to all parishes in Syria, St. Joseph is the exemplar for our pastoral care.

The Holy Father wrote in his message: "The climate, food, economic and migration crises cause great suffering and difficulties," and "2020 was marked by the great Covid-19 sanitary crisis, which has become a global multifaceted phenomenon, exacerbating closely related problems," these words seem to concern us. How can we not connect our daily life in Syria, and especially in Aleppo, with the message of the Holy Father, if the Pope himself mentioned the suffering that affects us in his speech?

## **Our cruel reality**

For years suffering has permeated our reality and is often the result of various types of shortages: lack of food, hygiene and medical supplies, the lack of fuel oil, gas, petrol. Electricity is only available for one hour a day. Suffering is our daily bread on these cold days. How can students learn in these conditions? How can mothers wash and iron clothes? How can they look after their children? How can we care for the sick? How can you live in this cold Aleppo, when it is so cold in every corner of our homes, making the darkness of hopelessness penetrate into the hearts which are full of sorrow and despair.

What does it mean to suffer for ten years due to this crisis, which may last several years longer? Fathers do not know where to get the money from to buy bread for their children. Joblessness, rising prices and inflation, that is why costs of living are getting higher and household incomes fall down. It is not for trivial reasons that many of our women have become depressed and suffer from heart diseases. A lot of fathers have committed suicide in desperation.

The crisis is affecting many **young people** whose childhood has already been stolen by the war. How much courage, strength and perseverance do you need today to become educated or get a job ? These young people do not have any means to build their lives, their future. The crisis affects **children** who do not have the opportunity to develop physically or mentally – the children growing up in families marked by an atmosphere of sadness, despair, insecurity and a lack of confidence that they will have enough to eat tomorrow. The crisis is affecting **education** as parents are unable to buy school supplies for their children and often cannot even get clothes or shoes to send them to school. A lucky mother, who is employed, told me that, after receiving her salary, she went with her daughter to buy her new shoes. The only shoes her child had were no longer wearable. The price of the new ones turned out to cost three-quarters of her salary. It is so sad, they came home with nothing. Another mom told me that she went to the store to get new trousers for her son. She came home with tears in her eyes without them because they were too expensive... Today, one of the mothers admitted that they did not have anything to heat up the water to wash their children and the possibility of preparing a hot meal. There are so many situations that deeply touch you - to tears.

The crisis is affecting **the elderly**, the weakest in our society as well. They often have several diseases and are unable to work due to disabilities. They have no income or financial security. How are they supposed to get food, fuel, warm winter clothes, medicines, often diapers, etc.?

### **In the footsteps of St. Joseph in Aleppo**

Like St. Joseph, who was not a passive and easily submissive man, but courageous and very committed, we accept life as it is, also this very difficult part of our existence. Following in his footsteps, we are faithfully looking for solutions that will help to face reality "with eyes wide open," taking personal responsibility for it (*cf. Patris Corde*).

The good news of the Gospel shows us that, in spite of all adversities, God always finds a way to save life, provided we use the same creative courage like the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into an opportunity, always trusting in Providence (*cf. Patris Corde*).

As a Church here in Syria, and especially in Aleppo, we feel that God has entrusted his people to us. Just as God trusted in St. Joseph, coming into the world and assuming a state of great weakness - by becoming the one who needs Joseph to be defended, protected, cared for and raised by him (*cf. Patris Corde*).

It is this Child who will say: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me"(Mt 25:40). So every needy, every poor, every suffering, [...] every sick person is a "Child" whom Joseph still guards (*cf. Patris Corde*).

### **Material support and spiritual accompaniment**

The Church is committed as much as possible here: we are no longer talking about help in general but about real "emergency first aid" for Christians in need. We try to meet basic needs that cover all ages: baby milk and diapers, food and medicine, paying for school supplies and help children with learning after school, distribution of clothes and heating oil for families, caring for the elderly, the sick and the disabled from restoring dilapidated homes to microeconomic projects. The help of the Church is not limited to material support, but also includes spiritual accompaniment. Christians need a lot of hope today.

All this darkness and all the crises we have experienced will not last forever, but only "time and times and half the time" - as it was written in Revelation (14:12). After all, the light must prevail. We know our suffering is not eternal, but we don't know when it will end.

### **To our benefactors ...**

Addressing many of our friends whom we have met, we would like to convey to you that for us you are a reflection of the tenderness of God and St. Joseph. Thanks to your help, we can keep the candle of faith, hope and love, lit in the hearts of all people, especially Christians, who are few.

We entrust you and all our mission partners to St. Joseph, you, who pray for us and support us, asking for his protection and intercession.

We thank St. Joseph for his exemplary life. He, who took responsibility for the family, did not run away from an unknown experience, even when it was very difficult, until he completely surrendered his life until the ultimate sacrifice. We can imagine the humility of St. Joseph, who was not satisfied with everything he had done for the Baby Jesus and His Mother, and we are not satisfied with everything we have done so far.

### **Prayer to Saint Joseph**

*Saint Joseph, you never complained but always made specific gestures of trust. The exemplar of self-giving, give us the courage of love, which manifests itself in totally giving ourselves to others, in total availability for others. Let us not leave anything for ourselves. May we be transformed, out of love for God, on the altar of love, into a perfect sacrifice, which will be a sign of the love and care of Christ who gave himself for our salvation.*

With prayerful good wishes for a spiritually fruitful Lent,

Father Ibrahim Alsabagh OFM

Parish Priest in Aleppo