



## **ASIA/SYRIA - The Maronite Archbishop of Damascus: Benedict XVI was close to these forgotten people**

Damascus (Agenzia Fides) – What has just begun will be the third Lent of suffering for Christians living in Syria. A time marked by anxiety and hope. This is what the Maronite Archbishop Samir Nassar of Damascus writes in a message sent to Fides Agency.

Mgr. Nassar focuses on some recent events that have inspired mixed feelings among the baptized in Syria: the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, the visit to Damascus of the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Rai, the exodus of the faithful of the Greek Orthodox church.

The resignation of the Holy Father - writes Mgr. Nassar - touched in a very special way the Syrian Christians: prayer and appeals of Pope Benedict XVI for peace in Syria, along with his concrete acts of charity, "had made the Pope so close to these forgotten people." The Maronite Archbishop hopes that we can proceed along the common path "in this time of Lent that he has chosen to continue his mission in a different way."

A happy fact mentioned in Archbishop's message is the Maronite Patriarch's recent visit to Damascus: "None of the 15 Greek-Orthodox Patriarchs " stresses His Exc. Mgr. Nassar "have dared to come to Damascus on the occasion of the enthronement of Giovanni X Yazigi as the new Greek-Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch. The only one who wanted to cross the Lebanese Syrian border to be present was the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Rai, despite the tensions that now mark the relations between the two Countries." S. B. Rai - says Archbishop Nassar - was welcomed by thousands of Christians who hailed "tears of joy" the Patriarch who came in the name of "peace, unity and hope."

A half-empty cathedral - says His Exc. Mgr. Nassar - had welcomed the new Patriarch on December 20, after his election. "The Greek-Orthodox Church " continues the Maronite Archbishop - "represents 60% of Christians in Syria," but in the two years of conflict, "the bleeding has lost more than half of the parishes. Many tens of thousands have left the country to escape to neighboring countries, trying to find refuge in the four corners of the world."

The weakening of the Greek-Orthodox community, defined by Mgr. Nassar "backbone of the Syrian Christianity," in his opinion calls into question the future of all Christian minorities in Syria. "The war in Iraq has caused the mass exodus of its Christians ... Will the War in Syria have the same consequences? " wonders the Maronite Archbishop, asking to pray " Our Lady of those without shelter " for priests in the hands of kidnappers since February 9 and all the other thousands of people who have disappeared in Syrian conflict . (GV) (Agenzia Fides 14/02/2013).