



ASIA/SYRIA - Bishop Audo: "Kidnappings are a plague: the aim is money"

Aleppo (Agenzia Fides) - More than religion, the reason is money. In an interview with Fides, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Msg. Antoine Audo, argues that "the scourge of kidnapping," that plagues the nation, has the aim of "the pursuit of money on behalf of armed gangs", spread throughout the country. A thorn in addition, that pollutes the heterogeneous picture of the forces in the field: for many the Syrian conflict is, therefore, a "good deal", which concerned at least 2,000 cases of kidnapping for ransom.

Bishop Audo tells Fides: "An Armenian Christian, George, who was kidnapped for three weeks, as he went from Damascus to Aleppo, and freed after paying a ransom of 15 thousand dollars told me that the emir of the group only wanted money, he spared no ideology or religion. Another priest kidnapped in the South, Fr. Hasan, was released after 11 days, when relatives collected, with difficulty, 100 thousand dollars. Before being released he told the torturers: 'I forgive you all, and if I did something wrong, I beg your pardon.' At that point, the emir - that is to say the leader of the group - began to blaspheme Allah. So these same Islamic groups are not sincere, they are fanatics who use religion and have the sole purpose of making money."

Bishop Audo, who is president of Caritas Syria, is not afraid of being kidnapped? "I am not afraid, I am prudent, I use my intelligence. I do not go to dangerous areas. And when I go to the Caritas centers or visit the refugees, many young people accompany me, of their own free will, because they say that 'everything has changed' and they want to protect me."

Faced with the destruction of Syria, one may fall into despair: "I have been a Bishop in Syria for 25 years: we have built churches, centers of catechesis, pastoral centers ... now we start again from scratch. We are in a precarious situation but we must stand firm. Only faith prevents the faithful to rebel against God. But we ask ourselves: when will we have peace?"

"In Syria - the Bishop continues - we have a heritage of values to defend, especially unity in the diversity of cultures and religions. The conflict is not sectarian or confessional. Today there is mourning and violence. Years ago there was oppression of the people and people had a freedom which was just a facade. The values that we desire are freedom and democracy, but it takes some time for them to mature, to educate the people to the democratic dynamics and to focus life on the concept of citizenship.

We have to get out of the trap of seeing the other either as 'kafir', ie 'unbeliever' at a religious level, or as a 'traitor' at a political level. We need to reverse this approach. The Church points the path for the Second Vatican Council which promotes ecumenism, religious freedom, dialogue, to serve the truth in love. My deepest desire is that Syria does not lose confidence." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 24/04/2013)