



## **ASIA/SYRIA - The Melkite Patriarch: appeal to save Maaloula, a holy place for the Syrians**

Damascus ( Agenzia Fides) - The cross that towered on the dome of the monastery of Saints Sergius and Bacchus does not exist any more. Armed groups of the jihadist Galaxy removed it, who on Wednesday attacked and invaded Maaloula, the small Christian village in the north of Damascus, a sacred place for all Syrians, where Aramaic is still spoken, the original language of Jesus. Even the Church of St. Leontius and that of Saints Cosmas and Damian were damaged. As Fides learns, armed groups, that for three months have been stationed on a hill overlooking the village, attacked the military checkpoint at the entrance of the village, killing the soldiers who were there. Then they entered the village and fired on houses, injuring three civilians. Asked by Fides Agency, the Melkite Patriarch Gregory III Laham, embittered by what he calls "the great tragedy of this war", launches an urgent appeal "to the international community, to the conscience of the whole world, to save the small village of Maaloula", which is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Damascus, "which is a very important Christian symbol in the history of Syria", he explains.

The Patriarch told Fides: "80% of the terrified population of the village have fled to Damascus. Yesterday refugees, came crying to the Greek Catholic and then went to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. We tried in every way to comfort them. Maaloula is a sacred place for all of us, but first of all its inhabitants are sacred: man is the holy temple of God. Armed groups are now holed up in the village, made up of houses built on the rocks. And any act of force to throw them out could mean the destruction of the place", notes with concern the Patriarch. Gregory III adds: "For two and a half years we have brought the cross, we are pilgrims in the Way of the Cross. The attack on Maaloula is a deep wound, it is a peak of our suffering, for its historical, cultural and spiritual value that the place has for all Syrians".

The Patriarch told Fides: "Tomorrow, September 7, we will live the Day of prayer and fasting for peace in Syria, launched by the Pope, in our Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Damascus. All the Patriarchs have called on the Bishops and faithful. We will celebrate a prayer vigil with Catholic faithful and of other Christian denominations. We have also invited the Muslims. We thank Pope Francis for this initiative which shakes the conscience of the world, indifferent for too long". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/09/2013)