



# NEWS

## Visit to LEBANON and SYRIA

December 2018

Sr. Monica Joseph RJM, General Superior, was accompanied by Sr. M<sup>a</sup> Carmen Muñoz RJM, General Councillor responsible for Europe, during the Visitation of Lebanon and Syria from 9<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2018. Sr. Helen Mary Haigh RJM, Provincial Superior, came with us also.



We are sure that all of you are anxious to know about our sisters in Lebanon and Syria, and to hear about how they are managing in these two countries which are going through such a difficult time.

Lebanon and Syria are two Middle Eastern countries which, in the Congregation, belong to the Province of Europe.

The Religious of Jesus and Mary began their mission in Lebanon in 1963 and in Syria in 1983.

### SYRIA

Syria is overwhelming. The seven long years of war (which began in March 2011) have destroyed the country. Suffering, death, people injured, bodies mutilated; the loss of homes, belongings and work; the displaced searching for somewhere to survive... We already knew about all of this, but, when you see it with your own eyes and when you share with those who have suffered, it is profoundly moving. We were left without words; reduced to silence by the horrendous situation of our Syrian brothers and sisters.

Our immediate sense was of deep admiration for our RJM sisters in Syria. They have been strengthened spiritually and emotionally by what they have lived through and experienced. It has not been easy for them. They have gone through countless experiences of fear, anxiety and crisis. Oftentimes they have been without the basic necessities, and not just for a few days but over long periods of time. They spoke of the terrible cold. We can only say how courageous they have been. They chose to remain with their people and to help them in whatever way they could. We are very proud of them.

Recently the European Province bought a reasonably large house in Damascus which has been restored. This means that now our sisters have their own place to stay, since previously they had always lived in houses belonging to the bishop.

### The Mission:

Catechesis with children and youth in several different towns.

Direction of and responsibility for the Damascus University Residence for female students, which belongs to the Bishop.

Due to the war experience; the mission in Syria has had to be creative and move into new fields of activity. Like Claudine, our sisters have looked for new ways and means to respond to the immediate needs of the people, and to reach out to the Christians, so that they may fulfil their desire of remaining in their own land.

### These are some of the new fields of activity:

**Honey production** which includes managing beehives, preparing and packaging the final product.

**Underwear factory** which provides work for many women.

**Factory for producing jeans, sweaters and other clothing.**

There is great demand for the products. This means that employment can be offered to many people. For Christmas, a large number of people were involved.

Families are offered new clothes, free of charge. They themselves can choose the items that they like. There is a place, like a large shop, where they go to pick out and to try on the clothes. They choose items of clothing for all the members of the family, which are then wrapped up and given to them. Toys and sweets are shared out to the children. Everyone is treated with care and their dignity is respected.

**Centre for Hope:** This centre has a base in our new house in Damascus, as well as in other places. It is necessary in order to soothe “the weeping”. Healing sessions are scheduled to take place in different centres.

**Study Centres:** This is another great need. Many buildings are in ruins. People are offered a place to study in, with computer access, silence and peace. English classes are also made available.

All services are offered free of charge. Support comes from different organisations.

All the work is done with lay people. At the moment we have only four Religious in Syria, but it is wonderful to see the number of lay people who collaborate with them. In fact, it is they who are the experts in these different areas of the mission. We marvelled at how our sisters get the collaboration and commitment of others. It is a laborious task: organising, ensuring that all goes ahead, monitoring the distribution, accounting for all of the money received... They have received tremendous support from various organisations who wish to continue collaborating with Jesus and Mary because of the good work they see being done and also because of the commitment and dedication of the Religious.

We were there before Christmas. We saw how food and clothing were given out to the people - not only in Damascus, Maalula and Aleppo where we have our mission, but also, through Caritas, there is a whole distribution network which reaches many different parts of the country. The people deeply appreciate our sisters because they give all that they are.

## The Reality:

The photographs show the destruction that has taken place in the country... It is difficult to imagine how this city can be rebuilt and returned to its former glory.

Great distances must be covered in order to move from one place to another. There are many checkpoints along the way, although this is good from a security point of view. Peace has not yet come to Syria.

The ecumenical movement is quite strong in this country. We participated in celebrations of the Eucharist in different rites. We were privileged to be able to visit and get to know the Cardinal and the Patriarch, as well as several bishops from different places. In Lebanon: the Maronite Bishop of Antelias, and the Bishop of Ad Abi Karam. In Syria: the Patriarch of the Greek-Catholic Melkite Church (Damascus), the Apostolic Nuncio of Syria (Damascus), the Bishop of Aleppo, and the Latin Bishop of Syria in Aleppo also.

We also met with various groups and organisations that help us. We spoke with the leaders and members of the “Twinning Foundation Open Doors”; we visited the jeans factory, the underwear factory in Maalula, the honey production plant in Ma’arouni, the Centre for Hope in Aleppo, the various Study Centres, the Armenian Social Centre in Aleppo, the clothes distribution centres in Aleppo and Damascus, the Orthodox Youth Movement, the Centre for Catechesis in Ma’arouni, etc.

The people we met were welcoming, kind, caring and respectful; and even though it seems contradictory, they transmit peace and joy. They dream of leaving behind the past and embracing a peaceful future.

Damascus is also important due to its relationship with Saint Paul. Fortunately, the places associated with his conversion, Ananias’ house and the wall he escaped by, have all been conserved.

## LEBANON:

In Lebanon, we have our two sisters: Sr. Youmna and Sr. Nawal. They live on one floor of our convent. The large Jesus and Mary school was handed over to the Diocese. Our two sisters are in contact with the school and collaborate there. The principal is Fr. Antoine Joseph Ghazal, who was at the Symposium in Lyon with two other lay teachers from the school (Hala El Zoghby and Nathalie Hallasou el Hani). Fr. Antoine did everything possible to ensure that we had a memorable visit. The many years spent working in the school by Sr. Helen Mary Haigh, who visited with us, were remembered with fondness. Everyone spoke with love of the sisters who have worked in the school. It is a beautiful school and is well known in Lebanon. We were warmly welcomed there. We were able to see all of the school facilities and meet with staff and students. This year's objective in the school is to develop the theme of Claudine and the Beatitudes. There is also a formation group called DINAMys which is dedicated to Dina Bélanger. Claudine's spirit is very strong in staff and students alike, thanks to the leadership of the Rector, Fr. Antoine and his team, and to Sr. Youmna and Sr. Nawal. Thank you for maintaining the JM spirit!

Sr. Nawal does so much good through her manual work which reaches out to many poor people. Sr. Youmna offers her services in the offices of the Archdiocese.

## **AFJM:**

There are groups of the Association of the Family of Jesus and Mary in Lebanon and in Syria. We met with the groups in Beirut and Damascus. The people we met there were joyful and committed.

At the end of our visit, our hearts were overflowing and we were filled with a huge sense of respect and appreciation. Etched deep within us are the many different faces and places, which touched us and enabled us to have such a deep experience.

**With these photographs, let us show you what we have been telling you about...**







Community in Lebanon: Youmna y Nawal



Community in Syria: Annie, Insaf, Antoinette, Manal



AFJM Groups. Young women from the University residence



Underwear Factory







Items produced in the factory. Choosing cloths



Some of the Volunteers



Ready for distribution...







Lebanon: Jesus and Mary School



*On behalf of the General Government,  
through the intercession of Mary, our Mother,  
Saint Claudine and Blessed Dina,  
we pray that the Lord may bless Lebanon and Syria,  
each one of our sisters, the communities,  
the AFJM and the apostolic mission.*

**Praised forever be Jesus and Mary!**