

# Letter to the Friends of Mar Musa Al-Habashi Monastery, 2024

## The Monastery of Mar Musa, Nebek, Syria

### Introductory reflection

*I have an unshakable faith, because it is rooted in a future of decisions and not of predictions, in the fact that Jews, Christians and Muslims will love and recognize each other. I have an unshakable faith in the fact that Jerusalem will one day be the blessed tent of our brotherhood in Abraham for the blessing of the world. (Paolo Dall'Oglio)*

Dear friends, peace to you. Peace to the Holy Land that for a year and two months has been experiencing a fratricidal war between Israel and Palestine again. The numbers are shocking: more than 44,000 people massacred, including more than 14,000 children. What can we call these children? Hamas terrorists? Collateral effects of the war? Raise your hand if you agree to do so.

It is a complex and difficult situation that did not begin with the massacre committed by Hamas on October 7, 2023, but well before. There are those in the West who justify the Israeli military invasion with the “right of self-defense.” But there are videos that show the enormous destruction in Gaza, spaces that were once inhabited and now have become endless piles of lifeless reinforced concrete. Is this self-defense?

It is not a question of being with Israel or with Palestine. Hamas cannot be supported because any fundamentalist movement that makes political and ideological use of religion cannot but persist in the use of violence and, therefore, cannot allow any future of peace and coexistence. However, in line with international law, the Palestinian people must be recognized as having the right to defend themselves against the occupation of their land, at least in Gaza and the West Bank, within those borders that were internationally recognized with the border of June 4, 1967. Nor is it a question of considering the occupation of other Palestinian territories legitimate or illegitimate. Peace-building requires that neither side uses the slogan “*From the river to the sea,*” which implies the prospect of the total elimination of the other. The International Court of Criminal Justice in The Hague recently decreed the arrest of Netanyahu and Gallant, in the Israeli government, and of the leaders of Hamas, all killed by Israel in the meantime. How many states in the world and in the West will take seriously this decision taken by the Court that they themselves founded? Before this ruling, the Pope had already invited – in my opinion late, but better late than never – to verify whether Israel's intervention in Palestine could be included in the crime of genocide, according to the criteria established by international law.

From my point of view, as a monk, I reject in principle, and firmly, every form of violence and I believe that only through meeting, listening and dialogue can we build authentic and stable paths of peace that lead to full mutual respect for social and cultural differences, to coexistence between religions and to the realization of human brotherhood. So be it.

## What is our hope?

*The Church is not a community against others... It is not even a community among others, one more community to be added to the total number of others. Rather, because of our baptism and our relationship with Jesus (Isa) Christ, we are faced with a frightening claim: that within us there is the leaven of the completion of every religion and every community. And that in every community there is a treasure for the completion of what we are of the ecclesial mystery. We say, with frightening exaggeration, that the Church is God's plan in the creation of the universe. (Paolo Dall'Oglio).*

According to various statistics, Christians in Syria belonging to all denominations, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, do not exceed 250 thousand people. The majority of them, if and when they can, will leave Syria permanently, some even selling all their properties. This also applies to many, if not the majority of Muslims. The repercussions on Christian communities are however different from those on Muslim communities. For Christians, the alarm must be sounded for the real danger of their extinction: the church in Syria is dying! This is an historic responsibility at a crucial moment in the life of the Church in this land. What else must we wait for before saying it, shouting it not only in the press, in conferences or in meetings of the clergy? If not now, when? The land that gave the name "Christians" to the first disciples is emptying of them, it is becoming a museum that preserves some examples of the Christians of this land. Even many priests, married and not, are emigrating, abandoning their faithful. Nothing will be able to prevent this hemorrhage. No material aid, no political or military change... no peace. Indeed, any stable peace would accelerate the process of emigration.

Syrian Christians, in general, no longer want – and I don't know if they ever really wanted – to live under Muslims and, perhaps, not even with them. I have written to our patriarchs, bishops and even to the Pope, to say that we must inform Syrian Christians of their true number, not to prevent emigration but to fulfill our duty as shepherds of Christ's flock. This is their right, and they must be aware of how many there are. It is on the rock of awareness that we must found our church and our presence in the East. Not simply because we were born there: being Christian is a mission and not a personal data. This applies to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the whole East. Christians can remain in the East on only one condition: finding the meaning of being Christian there, that is, understanding their mission. A Christian cannot remain in the East if his logic is comparison and competition with Islam and Muslims, being against and with feelings of hatred towards them, but neither can he remain in spite of them nor only alongside them. Because the destiny of such a Christian is, sooner or later, to leave. What can remain is a Church with Islam and for Islam, not against it, a Church that is not afraid of being a small flock, nor of being a loser. We have a mission, that of bearing witness to Christ and his love for Islam; to preach by announcing that: "living together with Muslims - even if it is difficult, demanding, expensive or even dangerous - is possible, and it is not only possible, but above all it is beautiful, comforting and dutiful. We can prophesy that universal brotherhood is not a utopia but is an achievable goal". It is clear that the destiny of us Christians in Syria will depend more on our vision and disposition towards Muslims than on that of Muslims towards us. If we love them, they will love us. I realize that this perspective does not necessarily apply to all Christians, but it certainly applies to those who accept as a gift and mission living in the East as a "small remnant" who have the evangelical call to be a "potential capable of living" like the yeast in the dough.

While this letter was being translated into other languages, the situation in Syria is changing dramatically. We hope that we will not return to civil war, division and battles for the interests of others on their land. We hope that we will not slide into a carpet bombing, as has happened in the past and as is happening in Gaza, which generates displaced people, innocent victims and general destruction of the country. We pray to God that the international community may assume a role that favors a solution of peace and justice for all Syrians.

While this letter was being translated into other languages, Syria has changed forever, Syria is finally free from the tyrannical regime (the least we can say) of Assad and the Bâth party. Let us hope that we do not slide now into a civil war, divisions and battles caused by foreign interests on our land. Syria needs the effort of its sons and daughters to build a flourishing future with a written constitution, shared and respected by all. Let us hope and work for an inclusive country where everyone feels at home, with the same rights and duties. Christians must not be afraid and must not only ask for their rights to be respected, they must not only worry about their communities but for all the communities that live in this country. We must work together for the good of all Syrians so that this country may rise to new life. Let us pray to God that the international community may honestly assume — at least once in its history — a role that promotes a solution of peace and justice for all Syrians.

The hope of the world is beauty. Let us bear witness to future generations that building bridges does not homogenize differences, nor does it erase traditions, but enriches everyone. Because bridges allow us to meet. There is a need for patient waiting and a burning desire for shared beauty, that is, to offer our treasures to the other and hope that he or she will share his or hers with us. Today, more than ever, people have no references, they no longer know where to look, many are not satisfied even if they have everything. The world needs God, the True God, tender, beautiful and loving towards men. Humanity is tired and is affected by many diseases, it needs a doctor and medicine, not just palliative care. It needs to experience that spiritual life is a serious and real thing. Our hope is to be able to see divisions erased and the borders that label the other as an enemy abolished. We hope to no longer have enemies. But if we find that we still have them, then we must have the courage and humility to make peace with our enemies, the courage to forgive and ask for forgiveness. This is Christmas, God who forgives and comes to erase all enmity.

Monk Jihad, Superior of the Monastery



## **The Monastery of Mar Musa, Nebek, Syria**

The most important news and the most beautiful news, a reason for hope for our al-Khalil community, we experienced it on the feast day of Mar Musa el-Habashi, August 28, 2024. During the Eucharistic celebration, our bishop, Father Jacques Mourad, approved the entirety of the monastic constitution written by Father Paolo who had already obtained the nihil obstat from the Holy See in 2006. In 2011, the then bishop of the diocese, Monsignor George Kassab, had approved an extract of the canons of the constitution as a first step. We can now rejoice that the immense theological and canonical effort of Paolo and the community has been crowned by total approval, all the professed members have renewed their vows for the occasion. Paolo has always wanted this institutional recognition by the Church, even though the community has existed for more than 30 years. More good news is that we have a new postulant, Majd, a young Syrian of 26 years from the Valley of the Christians, with an Orthodox father and a Protestant mother, a brother and three sisters. Majd studied chemistry at the university and before graduating, he lived in Erbil to work. But in his heart an old call to monastic life awakened. And from there, the voice of the Lord brought him back to Deir Mar Musa.



The annual chapter took place from July 29th to August 6th at Mar Musa, with all the monks and nuns present. We addressed a topic that is one of our greatest challenges: interpersonal relationships and in particular the relationship between men and women from an emotional and authority point of view. It is a crucial point for the future of the community and its ability to open

up to new vocations with their own personal charisms. Not without difficulty, at the end of the chapter, the community confirmed Brother Jihad as superior for a second term of 7 years.

The monastery, thank God, has continued to welcome pilgrims during this year, parish groups, youth confraternities, women, scouts, prayer groups, individuals, families and groups of friends. Some have come to do spiritual exercises with their guide, others just to enjoy the peace and silence of the monastery and to participate in the life of the community. We have also received many Muslim friends of different confessions, either for a short visit of a day or for a night or more. For the third consecutive year, we have hosted a group of Christians and Muslims who have done a Zen retreat for a few days in total silence. Those who wished, Christian or Muslim, have joined us to pray and meditate in the evening. European pilgrims are still few, but we are happy to receive them both individually and in groups. We have hosted a very important pastoral event on the level of the Syrian-Catholic Church. From August 8th to 12th, more than 50 young people, 4-5 from each parish, met with 7 Lebanese animators, lay people from the “Word of Life” group, two priests and with the presence of the youngest Syrian Catholic bishop, Monsignor Jules Boutros, director of the patriarchal seminary of Sharfe in Lebanon. The training meeting aimed to create active groups capable of planning pastoral care in their parishes.



The monks regularly present at Deir Mar Musa this year were **Houda**, **Yause**, **Ziad** (novice), **Majd** (postulant) and **Jihad**. This year too Houda participated in the Roman Synod on Synodality. From Syria 11 people were supposed to participate in the synod but unfortunately only 5 were able to take part including Houda, who was the only woman.

Along with **Youssef Bali** who has lived with us since 2006, this year there are also **Zena** who helps with the hospitality and **Elain** who does the secretarial work in the office. **Assaad** and **Musa** have helped in turn with the hospitality. **Loris**, a young Swiss man returned home in October after spending a year with us in spiritual research and working as a volunteer. Father **Wim Dombret sj**



from Belgium, shared our life for 3 months. He had started studying Arabic before coming, he continued his studies with us and collaborated in the daily activities, he also celebrated the mass in English when Father Jihad was away for some commitment. Wim is deepening his knowledge of the Christian East in view of making important life choices in the light of the Holy Spirit.

**The agricultural project** in the Monastery valley: the recovery and cultivation of the arid areas and the new terraces made last year, have given a new shape to the valley landscape. **Hussein Abu Raed** (our master builder) together with young Muslims, **Mu'tazz, Ali** and **Ahmad**, are finishing the last terrace under the first olive grove. Once this work is finished, we will begin preparing the land for the terraces for winter cultivation. The **agronomist** Eng. **Muhammad** assisted by **Samir Abu Riad, Youssef Hanna, Elian, Fadi** and **Abu Yazan**, have done huge agricultural work this year. The garden of harmony, which made the desert bloom, now also contains a new vineyard next to the olive grove and fruit trees. Our garden has given us good legumes and vegetables for the whole summer and the oil harvest this season should last us until next season. We have replaced one of the two work trucks and would like to replace the other one which has become obsolete, no longer repairable and dangerous for those who use it. We are unable to raise goats again next year but we hope to be able to at least repair and restore the shepherd's house and the sheepfold, to be able to resume sheep farming in 2026.



The construction of the **Pastoral Center** next to the parish church of Nabek is about to be completed. It will have a ground floor used as a kindergarten for 200 children, and two other floors that will be dedicated to parish use and monastery activities. **The Qalamun Kindergarten** continues to shine for its educational work and the 18 teachers are committed with great joy and enthusiasm. We have 170 children (3–5 years old) of which only 7 are Christians.

**The music school** has made significant progress with the increase in the number of teachers: some teach group playing, others solfeggio to beginners. Currently the school welcomes 60 boys and girls from the three parishes of the city, Syro-Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Evangelical. With the **medical support project** we continue to provide medicines to those suffering from chronic diseases and we contribute to the cost of diagnostic tests, medical analyses, small or large surgical interventions, dialysis, and chemotherapy for cancer patients. There are never enough funds for this project, the need is always greater than our available money. Many **poor people** knock on the door of the monastery and we respond to their needs to the extent that we can, also thanks to your solidarity. Most of these projects are coordinated and supervised directly or indirectly by **Marwan** who went to Italy in September for medical tests not available in Syria.



Music School and Kindergarden

The monastery continues to **support families** living in apartments it owns, built since 2008, and which are now inhabited by 18 very poor or low-income Christian and Muslim families. **George** is responsible for the management and supervision of the apartments and their maintenance. The help we offer these families consists of asking for a very low rent.

This year too, we are helping, in the hope of building a better future for Syria and the world, more than 65 **students** enrolled in the universities of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo to graduate. The project **Tosca Barucco** continues to support Syrian women, both Muslim and Christian, through school, university or professional training.

We have continued the restoration of the **Mar Elian monastery** in Qaryatayn and, thank God, we are well underway. There are already 12 beds that can accommodate guests. We also take care of the olive grove, the vineyard and the fruit trees, irrigation and vegetable production. One of our parishioners, **Mtanos ad- Dallul** , manages the work assisted by some Muslims from the city such as **Abu Ahmed** and the engineer **Rabeea. Jabra Gerges is the secretary for Mar Elian** projects and works with **Diab al-Assaf**, the general accountant of Deir Mar Musa who also oversees the **Tosca Barucco** project mentioned above.

## The Monastery of the Holy Savior, Cori

In Cori, **Deema** continues her third year of doctoral studies at the Gregorian. In March, Deema lost her father, a dear friend of all the members of the Community. May God have mercy on him. While **Carol** defended her doctoral thesis at the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, with a final grade of *summa cum laude*. After 12 years in Cori, Carol returned to Mar Musa after visiting her mother in Lebanon.

On November 30 and December 1, with the help of our friend **Piero Manciocchi**, we organized a conference in the Church of the Santissimo Salvatore with the title “From abandonment to rebirth for a new community”. It concludes an important phase of the restoration of this ancient church. Various speakers spoke about history, art, and restoration. The day of Sunday, December 1, was crowned by the Eucharistic celebration presided over by His Excellency Bishop Monsignor Mariano Crociata. Thanks to the paternal care and attention that the bishop dedicates to our community, it was possible to achieve this goal. At the end of the mass, Jihad thanked, on behalf of the monastic community, all those who contributed in various ways to the restoration of the church. Many friends and parishioners of Cori shared with us the joy of this special day. Some frescoes, walls, and some paintings kept in the parish halls, still need to be restored; we hope for



the contribution of donors. On the occasion of his trip to Italy, Jihad presented the book by Father Paolo entitled “*Dialogo sempre con tutti*”. This book is the second volume of the cycle of 137 conferences that Paolo gave in Deir Mar Musa between 2011 and 2012, commenting on the rule of the Community. The material that remains to be published can produce two or three more books, at the moment the necessary funding is lacking to translate the original texts from Arabic into Italian. We hope that these books can be translated into other European languages.



## **The Monastery of the Virgin Mary in Sulaymaniya, Iraqi Kurdistan**

In Sulaymaniyah **Jens** and **Friederike** carry on the life of our monastery. The Christian community of foreigners consists of some Europeans, but mainly Indians and believers from other Asian countries; every Friday this community attends Mass which is celebrated in English and the major Christian holidays are also celebrated at the monastery. Twice a week, Jens celebrates Mass for the Indian Carmelite nuns at their home at the Maria Madre della Misericordia hospital for the disabled. Friederike continues to help the theatre group under the direction of **Safa** who may in the future move abroad and leave the country. God be with her. We will then have to find someone to replace her. Friederike has to travel to Germany often to visit her elderly and sick mother.

Hundreds of students of different languages and their teachers animate the daily life of the Monastery. The small garden of the monastery, decorated with roses, orange and olive trees, creates a beautiful atmosphere for welcoming and sharing. Academic classes continue in collaboration with *Jesuit Worldwide Learning*. The monastery also welcomes guests who come for both short and long periods to visit the community and the city. The team working at the monastery consists of 35 people (mostly Muslim), including **Abdulmasih**, responsible for relations with government departments and official transactions; **Najah**, the secretary, and **Youssef**, who takes care of purchasing and maintenance. **Khuder**, who arrived with the great wave of refugees in 2014, is still present at the monastery and helps with the reception.

The restoration of the monastery church is an urgent necessity given the poor condition of the northern wall in particular, and of the building in general. The project has the support of Bishop



**Youssef Toma Mirkis**, who expressed his joy and gratitude for our presence in Sulaymaniya. We are also grateful for his fatherly attention and support in everything.



## Conclusion

Dear friends, we would like to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your abiding friendship and evangelical solidarity with our material and spiritual needs and those of our poor. Few things have changed since last year, a sign that the difficulties are always the same and are becoming increasingly difficult. The Syrian economic crisis, resulting from years of war and serious corruption at all levels, continues to weigh down the lives of the poor, who are more than 80% of the population. People are forced to face basic needs every day, such as food and drink, gas and diesel, medicine, school and university expenses. There does not seem to be a future or a horizon for our young people, Christians and Muslims alike, who are all thinking about immigration. Unfortunately, this country has lost much of its meaning for many of its people.

We would like to thank you by writing to you one by one for your generosity, but unfortunately this is not possible. Your donations, even the small ones, have a great meaning for us and bring us deep consolation, because we do not feel abandoned, someone is thinking of us. But one thing you can do in the future, come and visit us in Syria, when this will be possible. We would like to thank here in particular all the European organizations, Catholic and otherwise, that help us and also the associations of the Friends of Deir Mar Musa, in Italy, France and Switzerland, for their constant support and closeness. We also thank our friends in other parts of Europe and the world, such as Belgium, Sweden and Germany, where there are no official associations yet but there are true friends, who pray for us and help us with their donations.

We want to hope against all hope like Abraham al-Khalil, our father in faith, that beauty will triumph, that war will cease, that the hungry will be satisfied with joy and justice and the thirsty will be quenched with friendship and peace, and that the last will be first and that no one will be left last. We hope that everyone will live together as brothers. Merry and Holy Christmas to everyone.

The Monastic Community of al-Khalil

## How you can help us

You can use one of the options listed below, according to your preferences, for your money transfer:

**MAGIS (Italian Jesuits Association):** (<https://magis.gesuiti.it/>):

Bank Account: IT61E0501803200000011016169 - SWIFT: CCRTIT2T84A In the name of MAGIS - Movimento e Azione Gesuiti Italiani per lo Sviluppo.

Always indicate as purpose of the money transfer: “Deir Mar Musa” (in Italy a tax deduction is possible if you donate through the Magis).

**ASSOCIAZIONE AMICI DI DEIR MAR MUSA** (Friends of Deir Mar Musa Association)

Bank Account: IT34 K 05387 03206 000001908336- SWIFT: BPMOIT22 in the name of Amici di Deir Mar Musa. (donations made to the Association's account are not tax deductible in Italy). If you wish to send your donation for a specific purpose, please indicate it in the reason for payment. **Never write SYRIA** in the subject line of the transfer.

If you inform the Community ( [abba.j.youssef.dmm@gmail.com](mailto:abba.j.youssef.dmm@gmail.com) ) or the Amici di Deir Mar Musa Association ([amicideirmarmusa@gmail.com](mailto:amicideirmarmusa@gmail.com)) of the donations made, it will be possible to verify the receipt of the transfers and we will be able to thank you, as we wish. For specific communications related to donations, please write to: [amicideirmarmusa@gmail.com](mailto:amicideirmarmusa@gmail.com)