



Penitential vigil presided over by Pope Francis

October 1, 2024 - St. Peter's Basilica, 18:00 CET

WITNESSES

*** WAR

Sr. Deema, *hails from Homs, a Syrian city deeply scarred by the wounds of war. Sister of the monastic community of al-Khalil (the friend of God) founded in 1991 in the Syro-Catholic monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian by Paul Dall'Oglia S.J together with Jacques Mourad.* My name is Deema and I am from Homs, a Syrian city deeply scarred by the wounds of war. I am a nun of the monastic community of al-Khalil (the friend of God) founded in 1991 in the Syro-Catholic monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian by Paul Dall'Oglia S.J together with Jacques Mourad.

I am here today to share a testimony that words can't easily express. It is an experience of deep pain that often leads one to shut oneself in one's own torment, without being able to get in touch with the pain of others. War, in fact, not only destroys buildings and roads, but also affects the most intimate bonds that anchor us to our memories, our roots and our relationships.

During the Syrian war, the warring parties systematically tried to isolate the areas, even distancing themselves from experiences in neighbouring areas. This has progressively facilitated the rejection of all forms of empathy, labelling the other as an enemy and even in extreme cases dehumanizing him/her and justifying their killing. A Christian friend of mine once told me: "you know, I'm not afraid of death per se, but I'm afraid of being killed by my Muslim friend".

I vividly remember the tears in the eyes of young people from different areas when they learned about the experience of the other; at that time, the barriers of prejudice collapsed and the veil of the dehumanization of the other fell.

Many young people have chosen, for various reasons, the path of violence, and here it is not just about Muslims. Many young people, and not just Christians, have also dedicated their time to visiting and helping families in need or giving a smile to children. In our world, unfortunately wounded by so much violence, the emergency is to work on relationships. This work requires an extraordinary effort. War often brings out the worst in us, bringing to light selfishness, violence and greed. However, it can also bring out the best in us: the ability to resist, to unite in solidarity, not to give in to hatred.

Faced with the horror of war, it is easy to be overwhelmed by impotence, risking falling into despair, anger, wishing to denounce loudly every kind of injustice. However, this very sense of impotence can turn into a commitment, and this anger can become a light. It is a commitment to non-violent resistance that, with great effort, renounces every violent act and thought. This non-violent attitude becomes a powerful, silent, but powerful denunciation against those who profit from war, selling weapons, conquering lands or increasing their own power. It may seem utopian, but it is not. We have lived through it as a community, trying to light small lights in the darkness of war. We have tried to create opportunities for young people, working to create spaces of dialogue and growth that are fundamental for the reconstruction of relationships and hope for the future.



All this would not have been possible without the solidarity of many, not only material but above all moral and spiritual. The war was, in this sense also an occasion to perceive the grace of being part of a universal Church, which we celebrate today on its way towards synodality, where the pain of a member is helped with love and gratuitousness. This has allowed us to collect among the rubble of human suffering the most precious treasures: solidarity and brotherhood, which continue to shine as signs of hope and peace. Even in the darkest moments, where cries can rise to God asking why? or doubts about His presence crowd the mind, right there you can meet God. As our friend wrote in the title of her book on the experience in the countries of the Middle East affected by war: *God in the midst of the ruins*.

***** ABUSE**

*South African baritone **Laurence** initially completed his vocal training at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Laurence began his operatic and concert career in Germany after completing his studies at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich with, among others, master classes in song interpretation with Hans Hotter, Dietrich Fischer Dieskau and Brigitte Fassbender. Three residencies followed at the State Opera Kassel, Braunschweig and at the Gärtnerplatz Theater in Munich. He has sung at numerous European theaters such as the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, the National Theater in Prague, the Istanbul Opera House as well as the State Theaters in Hanover, Mannheim, the Prinzregententheater Theater in Munich and the Cuvillies Theater in Munich. Laurence sings the entire baritone repertoire as a freelance artist, specializing in dramatic Verdi and Wagner roles. Laurence is also an enthusiastic interpreter of art songs and has performed in many venues around the world with accompanists such as Gabriel Dobner and Alfons Kontarsky.*

Good evening, everyone,

I stand before you today as a survivor of sexual abuse by a member of the Catholic clergy.

A Personal Story:

Far from Rome, in a small town in Southern Africa, a predator honed in on me, an 11-year-old child. Over several months, he used praise, physical punishment, psychological manipulation, and all the other tools in his arsenal to manipulate and groom me. Finally, on a beautiful South African morning, he led me by the hand to a dark place where, in the screaming silence, he took from me what should never be taken from any child. I have since been forced to walk with this perpetrator stamped onto my soul for the last fifty-three years. This moment in time, in all its sordid detail, is a part of my physical being and consciousness, and is as present today as it was when it took place, the shocking rape and violation of an eleven year old child by a grown man. My story is one of many, and it is in sharing these experiences and facing them without fear, that we shed light on this particular perfidious darkness.

Psychological Toll:

The impact of such abuse is profound and long-lasting. For victims, the psychological toll often includes feelings of betrayal, shame, anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder, e.g. contemplation of suicide. These effects are not confined to the victims alone; they ripple outward, affecting families, friends, and communities. The abuse of a child by a trusted figure—a priest, a mentor, a representative of God—inflicts wounds that can take a lifetime to heal, if they ever fully do.

Anonymous Faces:

One of the most heart-wrenching aspects of this issue is the anonymity that often surrounds it. Many survivors remain unnamed and unheard, their stories silenced by fear, stigma, or threats. The faces of the abused are too often blurred, hidden behind a veil of secrecy that the Church,



historically, has been complicit in maintaining. This anonymity serves to protect the perpetrators rather than the victims, making it harder for survivors to find justice and for communities to heal.

Lack of Transparency:

A key factor that has perpetuated this crisis is the lack of transparency within the Church. For decades, accusations were ignored, covered up, or handled internally rather than reported to authorities. This lack of accountability has not only allowed abusers to continue their behavior but has also eroded the trust that so many once placed in the institution. The reluctance to address these crimes openly has been a disservice to the victims and a betrayal of the Church's ethical and spiritual responsibilities.

Effect on Society:

The consequences of these abuses extend far beyond the walls of the Church. They have shaken the faith of millions, tarnished the reputation of an institution that many look to for guidance, and caused a crisis of trust that reverberates through society. When an institution as prominent as the Catholic Church fails to protect its most vulnerable members, it sends a message that justice and accountability are negotiable—when in reality, they should be fundamental.

*** MIGRANTS

Sara Regional Director of the Fondazione Migrantes and together with Solange (from Ivory Coast) from the Diocese of Massa and Carrara Pontremoli.

I am called Sara. I am Regional Director of Tuscany of the *Fondazione Mirantes* and together with Solange we come from the Diocese of Massa and Carrara Pontremoli. The Port of Carrara, in the upper Tyrrhenian Sea, 700 miles from Lampedusa, for over a year and a half, has been declared “safe haven” for the landing of NGO boats that rescue migrants on makeshift boats in the Mediterranean Sea: the Mediterranean Sea route is considered the most dangerous migratory route in the world because on average, six people lose their lives every day.

Those who have survived, those who made it, arrive at our port, on our coasts: people who have crossed the desert; suffered from hunger and thirst; have suffered violence of every kind, of which they bear evident marks on the body and on the skin and signs hardly visible in the soul and mind; but often the latter are the most painful for one's dignity, and, the most difficult to care for.

They are “the survivors”, the migrants who, for a game of fate, were on the right boat that did not sink, in the right time because not too stormy and in the stretch of sea just because only after a few days of navigation were spotted and recovered. All this seems to be a brutal game of fate, of which we are “spectators” because we can do nothing but wait on the shore for those who have survived: we rejoice for those who manage to get there alive; but with a sense of guilt for those who have not. An even deeper sense of guilt in those who survived because they succeeded where many fellow travellers in the journey for life, have failed: they died often in silence and anonymity because no one will ever know where and when.

The moment of alighting from the boat that has rescued them is, each time, a moment rich in emotions for us all. Eyes speak; black eyes that reflect everything they have seen and lived because you see the painful memory of those who did not make it and the fear of those endless moments where, prevailing over solidarity, which is absent on “boats of hope”, was the instinct of survival that took away humanity from a gesture, a caress.

The experience of the boat is not that of people who live a way of life in communion with others: it is not the solidarity of one single people, it is chance that brings together, one on the



other, united by a common fate lived in solitude, each one for their proper survival. As it was in the Concentration Camps where men and women lost their identities as individuals, communities, and people, and were no longer people but numbers, bodies that tried to survive, often at the expense of others. They land at the port in small groups. First the sick; then women with children; then unaccompanied minors and finally men. An alighting that testifies to the loneliness even of families who never get off together and we help to reconstitute as soon as they land, often with enormous problems.

Sometimes a brother, a son, a cousin, who have already lived that experience, arrive in Carrara, in the area outside the port, especially from northern Europe, they followed on digital nautical maps the journey of their loved ones, not knowing whether the vessel carrying them to safety has them on board. They seek them through the barricades living in terror of hope that as soon as they recognize and meet them, turns into a river of tears, of embraces.

From the moment of landing to that of departure for the different destinations, it takes about ten and more hours for the sanitary procedure, identification, fingerprints. Very valuable hours for us volunteers: eyes watch you, while you try to calm them down; will you be able to reunite them with relatives and friends who were on the boat with them even in the final destination? They want to understand what will happen next. They want to talk and tell you their story in one breath.

The women who are the most silent and invisible, are first to begin telling their story; the choice of leaving home, which was not safe, where you were segregated by a father, an abusive husband, the father of your children. Then comes a day when an acquaintance, taken by compassion, helps you to escape, to embark on a journey with the sole purpose of getting away from the violence of a life of abuse. In the end, the only chance you have is to escape: you leave your children because you fear that they will not be able to overcome such a difficult journey where you will not be able to protect them, and with them you leave a part of yourself. You are more and more alone, even if physically with others, you travel through countries, deserts and encounter the violence that takes away the only things that are left to you: your body and your dignity.

You arrive in Libya or Tunisia; you have the last stretch for Europe and often you want to go back: but you can't anymore. And you're afraid. Fear of the sea, of that stretch of water which from a mirage of hope for life becomes an insurmountable wall of waves of water. You have no choice: if you want to have even a chance to survive and continue giving hope to your children, you get on board. Pushed on the makeshift boats, uncertain little shells of walnut in a gigantic sea of water, you face the darkness; and you are alone among many ... too many who cry, cry when the waves grow, the supply of water and food ends, the motor stops in stages, the boat embarks water, saltwater that mixes with the remaining fuel and boiling oil that burns your legs, especially to you who, because you are a woman, have been put closer to the engine compartment ... and you think you can't survive it and you pant and scream and look for help with your hands, help that those who are with you cannot give because they are like you ... a ghost migrant in the middle of the sea ... until someone comes to your rescue and finally you land. One hand grabs you: You survived!

Your eyes, your hands tell the sense of emptiness; but also, the fear that your body, besides the signs, brings the fruit, in your belly, of all the violence you have suffered. When I asked Solange, who landed in Carrara five months ago, to accompany me to witness together what is happening, with eyes full of joy and gratitude for the proposal, she said to me "I come to take along with me all my Africa".

We are here today to witness to a new humanity; as people who accompany people to be people; as women who help women to be women: people and women who have welcomed the stranger



and the foreigner who has arrived at their port and was in you. Thank you for listening to us, and thanks to my family, my husband and our three children who share my commitment.