**Message of the Brother Superior General**

**June 6, 2015**

Dear Marists of Champagnat:

Last year I recorded a video for the feast of St Marcellin Champagnat in which I introduced each of the three years of preparation at the beginning of the third Marist centenary. 2015 is the Montagne Year, an we invited to deepen our awareness of the mission that has been entrusted to us and recognize the faces of today’s Montagne, I thought we should listen to some of the Marists that are in the peripheries to which Pope Francis calls us so insistently.

Taking advantage of my presence in Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, a group of Blue Marists, as they are generally known among us, travelled from Aleppo in Syria for an informal meeting. They will share with us something of their daily life over these past four years, affected by the war, as well as what keeps them going, their commitments, their hopes.

**Br GEORGES SABE, Marist community of Aleppo:**

The situation in Aleppo is serious. The city is currently divided in half. We live in the area that’s under the government completely separate from the other half. Both parts of the city are being bombed.

Speaking about the situation of Christians, the Christian minority in the city has been further reduced as a result of the bombing of neighbourhoods, churches and cathedrals. If we speak specifically about the bombing of Christian areas, it doesn’t mean that we forget about those areas where the Muslim majority are also being bombed. Many people are being killed. Many want to escape, get out of this war-torn, abandoned city. We are also suffering from a lack of water and electricity. Winter can be very cold in Aleppo and there is no gas for heating. People are bearing up, but there will come a time when they can no longer cope.

The problem is really serious. The city has been abandoned. People are also tired of promises that aren’t kept. They promise us peace, and a return of basic services, but the reality is very different. People put up with the suffering just now… but the time will come when they won’t be able to endure it any longer.

**BR GEORGES HAKIM, Marist community of Aleppo**

What has helped me remain hopeful, above all else, is my unshakeable faith in the risen Jesus. I can also say the brothers I live with help me remain hopeful. Lay people in particular and especially the lay people, who are very committed; they too give us courage and hope

**ALICE MARDENI, teacher, Blue Marists of Aleppo**

Hi, brother Emili. I’m Alice. I want to say something about the little hope that you spoke to us about. My ray of hope is the Marist Family, with whom I live wholeheartedly. We live together, we rejoice together, and we hope together. I want you to be united to us, not only through your messages, but by one day visiting the house and seeing for yourself the children we work with, and the family we form.

**BR BAHJAT AZRIÉ, Marist community of Aleppo**

The first and most important thing that the Blue Marists, the brothers and the lay people are offering is being Marists, being next to the children and youth, especially the ones who are neglected and wounded the most by the war, externally and internally. We have two types of projects. Some assistance projects consisting of material aid to 500 Christian and Muslim families through monthly food distribution. We also have a project that helps find rented accommodation for those families who have had to leave their homes. One of the projects is to assist the war-wounded, the civilian casualties of war. Other projects are development projects where we try to accompany children and youth in their formation, starting with the youngest. We have two education projects with pre-school children: one is called *I want to learn* and the other, *Learn to grow*. Another project is *Skill school* where we try to help adolescents develop their personal abilities and social skills so that they can face the difficult time of war. We also have a formation centre called MITA (*Marist Institute for Training*) that offers courses, conferences for youth and adults of Aleppo who are seeking to grow…and so on.

So the Marists are offering a place to say: it is possible to carry on living and finding meaning in life, even amid the senseless violence and chaos of war.

**BR GEORGES HAKIM, Marist community of Aleppo**

As a sign of life, I also see the commitment of the lay people. Since the crisis began, I have also seen a great to the Muslim world.

**MARIAM ARAB, teacher, Blue Marists of Aleppo**

I am living in a Christian community that is offering a lot and this impresses me. It is something that has deeply touched me. Ever since I was a girl, I have dreamed of living like this.

My presence here helps me truly be myself. One day, I want to be like all you brothers, living these values in a Muslim community and being able to carry out a mission just like this.

Hopefully! Thank you.

**BR AHJAT AZRIÉ, Marist community of Aleppo**

We greatly appreciate all the solidarity and emotional support of the Marist world with us. But we are no heroes, far from it. We are Marists, we want to be Marists, we want to be faithful to our vocation, to the will of Father Champagnat of being next to the Montagne of today. I believe that all Marists all over the world are on this same path. Here in Syria, we are. At this time we are in a situation of war, and we are going to try to continue being Marists.

**BR GEORGES HAKIM, Marist community of Aleppo**

I’ve finally learned to be more Marist and to love my Marist vocation more. Every day, I believe that more and more… I believe that my Marist vocation is so important for me personally today, but also for the world in which I am living in. I think that discovering the charism, discovering that Marcellin is inviting us today to waken up, to get to know the Montagne of today, to get close to them, to respond to them is what our charism is all about; it’s a real offered to the Gospel in 2015.

The witness of the blue Marists is an encouragement for Marists all over the world, like the testimony of other Marist communities who are in particularly difficult areas. Our deepest gratitude to everyone, and be assured of our communion and support so that you continue to be a presence of a Church with a Marian face, open, welcoming, in dialogue, a Church that serves.

I believe that our brothers and sisters, through their life and options, challenge those of us living in relatively comfortable conditions. Faced with the invitation of placing yourself at the service of the Montagne of today, are you willing to leave your comfort zone and take some risks?

Marcellin had infinite trust in the Lord, as did Mary, who put herself unconditionally at the service of a project much greater than herself: Mary said, ‘Yes, you can count on me.’

Mary is venerated here in Harissa and in the whole world by millions of Lebanese Christians. She is also loved by our Muslim brothers. To her, we entrust the lives of the children and youth people who live in particularly vulnerable situations, as well as those people who have generously placed themselves at their service.

Our Lady of Lebanon, Queen of Peace, woman of service, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, pray for us.

From Lebanon, to all the Marists of Champagnat: May this feast of St. Marcellin be a happy one; may it lead us to greater commitment!

Thank you. Peace.