

TESTIMONY

The suffering Christians of the Middle East: Where is God in all this?

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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A few weeks ago while desperately trying to get some news about Mosul and my aunt Sister Utuur, there I stood feeling bomb shelled as I read the news I feared most, 'two nuns, two orphan young girls and a little boy held by ISIS'. Immediately my mind was

assaulted by many questions 'why were they risking their lives, for Goodness sake?', 'How can God allow this?' But the biggest and most pertinent question of all was 'Where is God?'

It was exactly this very question that haunted me for a few months after visiting the House of Terror in Budapest last February. Once the iron doors were shut behind me, a wave of anguish and despair started engulfing me and which must have engulfed those prisoners walking up and down the stairs of that place of horror. Our grim visit was going to finish with a visit to the basement. The journey in the lift that took us down was long enough to be accompanied by a video of a witness telling us all about the hanging ceremony. My young host, actually a student of mine, started taking me from one torture cell to another explaining in gory details all about each method and tool of torture exhibited. He patiently told me the story behind each picture hanging that were hanging in a few cells.

During this haunting visit, my mind and my heart were engaged in the fiercest interior debate that has ever been taking place, arguments and counter arguments were flashing back and forth at a terrifying speed. However, the debate reached its peak when I was shown a cell where the prisoners would be submerged in filthy water for days on end. It was then that I could no longer escape or suppress the cry 'Where is God?'

The question that I've always tried to keep at the back of mind and which will undoubtedly vex anyone who has been brought up to believe in the Good God, suddenly became the burning question. It was there and then that I could hear a gentle voice whispering a clear answer 'I am there! No one enters that cell without me accompanying them, I still bear the marks of the cross.'

I can hardly remember myself being filled with so much peace and gratitude to my God who is not only almighty but who has himself experienced the deepest pain and fear that can ever pierce any human heart. What is more, Jesus is not only the suffering one, he knows what it means to see the pain in the eyes of the loved ones whose silent pain and anguish is sometimes harder to bear than any other physical suffering. Only him could fathom the pain that was piercing his Mother's heart when she was watching her only and innocent child being slaughtered.

It will take more than ten pages to go about the school of suffering my family, like so many Iraqi families, have been through. My father died two decades ago leaving behind a beautiful widow of 28 and four little girls. My paternal grandmother saw her

house destroyed twice. On both the paternal and maternal side, my grandmothers and two young uncles respectively died shortly after each other. However, it was thanks to the great faith of my family which I could literally touch with my own hands that I could always trace the defaced and vague marks left behind by the Good God as a sign of his presence. It was that beautiful and simple faith that was challenged in Hungary and once again during the last few weeks. But my family was right again, God only sends suffering to those whom he trust, because he needs people to help him carry his heavy cross.

My family has always felt privileged that God has chosen us and shown us his mercy and favour. It was thanks to my 'unlettered' paternal grandmother that I've come to learn that God never tempts or tests anyone beyond their ability. It was the same intelligent and courageous woman whom when she saw our home in rubbles, eulogised it and shed tears for 15 minutes, after which she stood up and said, 'all the material things are mere dirt of our hands, Blessed be God for ever!' I only know about this episode from my mother who accompanied and was so impressed by her reaction. Because my grandmother never mentioned anything about that house, complained or cursed anyone.

Now I know, not only theoretically, but with a conviction that fills my whole being, that what God told Satan about Job applies to each one of us 'you can thus far, but no further'. Yes, it is true that evil seems to have gained the upper hand, yes it his our now. However, no authority on earth, however brutal it may be, can inflict anything on us if it is not allowed by God for our greater good.

My family has taught us to give God a chance before slamming the door in his face. Sister Utuur, 'fragrance in Arabic', and the other nun did their annual retreat in their captivity but in union with their religious order who had its annual retreat then. She told us that she was able to challenge the Islamic governor who was interrogated them and so refused to give up her religious habit and more importantly her faith because she and her companions were witnessing the unmistakable presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the middle of the screams of pain and anguish that were surrounding them and were wrenching their hearts. God allowed something like this to happen because he urgently needed prayer and reparation for so much evil and senseless pain. My aunt and her companions were there to bring the fragrance and light of Christ to illuminate the abyss of darkness into which so many people have been thrown. They were the Christ passing by in the middle of all that terror and horror and with his gentle but unmistakable voice 'Don't be afraid, I'm with you!'

The question 'Where is God?' is at best an unfair question and begs for another question 'Where is man?' However, when Jesus was crowning his way of the cross with a shameful and painful death, he did not ask that question but he asked a more pertinent question that each one of us can and most probably would utter at some point in our lives, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is a sincere question that can be addressed to God and it is the one question that God will never leave unanswered. It is a question that reveals the depths of our dignity and humanity and the unfathomable mystery of God.

Our personal way of the Cross is meant to teach us that in the middle of all the suffering the glory of God the Father is shown and the splendor of the risen Son manifested because where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Freedom, there is peace! Thanks Auntie Utuur and her brave companions, especially the little boy, for proving to us yet again that God is still in charge because he is Good and his mercy endures for ever.