
Italian Bishops' meeting on the Mediterranean. Msgr. Gonzales Ruben Tierrablanca (Turkey): "No to arms trafficking. In war everyone loses"

"The Mediterranean must rediscover its vocation to hospitality and peace", said Msgr. **Gonzales Ruben Tierrablanca**, from Istanbul. He will participate in the meeting for peace in the Mediterranean, as President of the bishops of the small Church in Turkey, with this "dream" in his heart. "" First of all - he said - it will be an ecclesial meeting where all of us bishops will come together and meet to discuss and share experiences concerning both the actual situation of each country and the local Church, as well as the broader issue of the Mediterranean. In the course of history its waters have been crossed by local peoples, travelling from coast to coast. It has been a crossroads of encounter, yet this dimension has ultimately been lost."

Bishop Tierrablanca promptly recalled that the Catholic Church in Turkey represents a small minority in the country. Statistics show that about 35,000 people are Catholic, representing 0.05% of the Turkish population (the vast majority of whom are Muslim) and are mostly communities of foreigners. Many arrived in Turkey following the migration routes: Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, citizens of sub-Saharan Africa. "We are guests", remarked the bishop of Istanbul. "We have no legal recognition, therefore our activity is very limited. Nevertheless we do our best, and are actively engaged, while respecting the pertinent boundaries", he pointed out.

Efforts focus on migrant people. "" The Turkish government - the bishop said - signed a deal with the EU on migration management." Accordingly - in 2016 - Ankara pledged to manage the inflow of migrants in return for €6 in financial aid guaranteed by the EU. This agreement, especially in times of global tensions, becomes a source of friction between Turkey, requesting funds, and the EU, which responds by demanding reliable plans. Based on end-of-year figures from Ankara's Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, there were 445,000 undocumented migrants in Turkey in 2019: a significant increase compared to 268 thousand in 2018. 105 thousand were repatriated to their countries of departure.

"We are ready to help ", said Tierrablanca, and "Caritas Italy is providing support". The commitment of the Catholic Church is chiefly aimed at assisting the immigrant population in the extremely difficult integration process. "Many immigrants don't not leave immediately for other Countries. We had the experience of people from Iraq who arrived in Turkey as early as 1991, following the outbreak of the first Gulf War. 30 years have passed and they are still here, awaiting to move to another country. They live among the Turkish people and find it very hard to integrate into society. They are not always well received. So we must support them according to our possibilities".

"I look forward to the meeting in Bari with great hope and I grateful to the Italian Bishops' Conference for having promoted this initiative", said Fr Tierrablanca. "It will be an opportunity for reflection, sharing, and creativity, paving the way to new paths." "The Mediterranean has a vocation to hospitality." "That spirit has characterised European countries, as well as Italy, for years. But they seem to have forgotten it owing to recent problems. Yet that spirit remains. It is necessary to encourage, support and make that vocation grow." The bishop likewise underlined the need to understand the origins of this migratory movement: "difficulties and problems, but above all wars." He added: "It should be reiterated over and over again, our refusal to the manufacturing and trafficking of weapons that fuel conflict, is never enough.

In war everyone loses. War is never just."

Mons. Tierrablanca concluded his thoughts commenting on the fear that migratory flows often generate in host countries. "Sometimes different cultural traditions and religious affiliations, when they don't know each other, cause fear and give rise to negative reactions of self-protection and closure. This phenomenon must be properly understood. But we have are the ones who erected the borders and often those borders were not planned and established with justice. What do they respond to? To a culture? They frequently respond to power, they are the result of oppression, sometimes military. The Christian vision of the world is different and it is based on the belief that the whole human family belongs to a common home. Perhaps we should reflect on the origins of these problems. I think it is necessary."

M. Chiara Biagioni