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## Italian Bishops' meeting on the Mediterranean. Msgr. Bugeja (Libia): "Libyan Church present, not hidden"

"Present, not hidden": it's the Catholic Church in Libya in the words of the Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli (Libya), Msgr. **George Bugeja**, Friar minor of Maltese origins, in Tripoli since 2015 as coadjutor and now as titular bishop.



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[It's not only a question of recognition \(including governmental\) - the Holy See re-established diplomatic relations with Libya in 1997 - but of a true "presence" on the ground. "Ours is a Church of 'presence' that carries out her mission in a Muslim country. We remained in Libya when everyone had left as a result of the war and the Libyan people appreciated our choice" the bishop told SIR on the sidelines of the seminar "Emergencies and humanitarian crises: the earthquake in Albania, the Libyan situation and the Balkan route", promoted by Caritas Italy, held yesterday in Rome. As of tomorrow \(until the 23rd\) Bishop Bugeja will be attending the meeting of reflection and spirituality promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference \(CEI\) "Mediterranean, frontier of peace". He will be representing the small Libyan Catholic Church comprising a few thousand faithful. "In Benghazi - said Msgr. Bugeja - there are three Friars Minor, one has arrived just recently as apostolic administrator. I am in Tripoli with a confrere. There are also two communities of Sisters of Mother Teresa, a total of eight nuns who volunteer in two government institutions near Tripoli housing the mentally disabled. Their efforts are deeply appreciated." The Vicariate of Tripoli has only one church, devoted to Saint Francis, "assigned to but not owned by the Church." It was confiscated, with Church assets, after the 1969 revolution.](#)



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Clashes between the militias loyal to General Haftar and those of Fayez al Serraj, head of the only UN-recognized government, are ongoing. But there are some signs of progress. Yesterday, in Brussels, the EU Council agreed on a new Libyan naval mission, replacing Operation Sophia - launched in 2015 to prevent human trafficking, but gradually shelved as thousands of migrants were brought back to Libyan Coast Guard detention centres and subjected to systematic violence and abuse of all kinds. The primary objective of the new operation will be maritime and satellite control to implement the arms embargo in Libya. **Your Excellency, what is the situation in Lybia today?** Libya is going through a very critical moment, with persisting difficulties. Diplomatic efforts are being made, as evidenced by the EU Council meeting in Brussels. As far as we are concerned, as a Church we continue ministering to our communities, all formed by foreigners, mostly Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis and sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom are transit migrants.

**The people can only hope for peace.**

**What are the difficulties you face on a daily basis?** As we work with immigrants - and not with locals - the problems we face are connected with their condition. Every Friday the Caritas office in our Vicariate is open, with a long line of people asking for food, clothes, as well as help to obtain a visa for Europe – which we cannot help with as it is a task that falls within the remit of the embassies. The Italian embassy is working on this. The majority are Nigerians, Eritreans, South Sudanese. Many of them decide to cross the desert and the Mediterranean Sea because, they say, 'we have nothing to lose. If we ever reach Europe we will have achieved something'. We witnessed their desperation. All we can do is help them register with the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, or for those wishing to return to their country of origin, with IOM, the International Organization for Migration. We do whatever little we can to the best of our possibilities. We are a Church operating in a 100% Muslim country and we have limited capacity in this respect. **What will be the Libyan Church's contribution to the meeting in Bari?** I will report to the other bishops and confreres on our current situation and I will listen to their contributions. We will listen to each other and from one another learn how to cope with situations, how to handle them. If that happens we will have reached a preliminary result. It's a long journey, but it has to be pursued with small, continuous steps. **Is there a word that best describes your Church?**

**We are a "present" Church that carries out her mission in a Muslim country. We are not hidden.**

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We were the only ones that remained in the country after all embassies had evacuated as a result of the war. The Church remained, present, offering her services to those in need. The people in Libya very much appreciated our decision to stay. **What is the state of relations with the Muslim majority?** Until 2014 we had relations and contacts with local imams. Now that network has been interrupted due to the war and the lack of security. I hope these relations will resume in the future.

**To meet and dialogue together is a step in the right direction.**

**Do you believe in peace? Do you believe there is still room for a peace negotiation, a truce, a definitive ceasefire?** I have faith. I believe that sooner or later it will happen. I believe there is a willingness to reach that stage. We hope it will happen soon. To some extent, the stabilization of the country will also contribute to the solution of the migration problem from its shores.

Daniele Rocchi