
Italian Bishops' meeting on the Mediterranean. Msgr. Antoniazzi (Tunis): "I call upon young people not to leave and to love their Country"

A small Church in continuous movement. It mainly comprises students, sub-Saharan migrants, entrepreneurs, European pensioners. They stay in Tunisia for a few years, then they leave. But the same number arrive. "Our community is renewed every three or four years. That's the difficulty of our pastoral ministry. We cannot make long-term plans." It's the description of the local Christian community in the words of Msgr. **Ilario Antoniazzi**, Archbishop of Tunis of Venetian origins. At the age of 14 he entered the seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and remained in the Middle East since then. He has been leading the Catholic Church in Tunisia, that counts some 30-40,000 faithful, since 2013, "but these are very flimsy statistics," he says. The cathedral, located on Avenue Bourguiba, in the centre of Tunis, renowned for the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011, is a meeting-point for people from different countries. Many men and women from sub-Saharan Africa also remain here for some time before venturing on a journey of hope across the Mediterranean. Many have never returned. Bishop Antoniazzi listens to their stories and sufferings. Over the years he came to conclusion that it would be best if they didn't leave. It's too much of a risk. "If we add up the costs of the air ticket, the trip, the rental in Tunisia - not to mention the risk of falling into the hands of traffickers -, with that same amount of money they could accomplish a project of life and work in their own country," he says. With this spirit the Archbishop of Tunis is participating, together with his confreres from 20 countries on the northern and southern shores, in the meeting "Mediterranean frontier of peace" taking place in Bari from today, February 19, to 23 February, organized by the Italian Bishops' Conference. The visit of Pope Francis will conclude the event. **What does the Church of Tunisia need today? What is the state of the dialogue with Islam?** The Church of Tunisia is a periphery Church and it's somewhat ignored. Islam here is not the same as in the Middle East. We have some limitations but we're not threatened, insulted. We recently had the joy of seeing Tunisia increasingly open up to Christianity. For example, Ministers are consulting us to learn the position of the Church on bioethics, on forgiveness, on peace. I find this extremely interesting because until a few years ago it seemed as though we didn't exist. Not that the doors are wide open to us, but it's nice to see that the Church is starting to have a role in Tunisian society. For example, our schools are attended by Muslim students, the teachers are Muslim, the only Christian is the principal or the headmistress. Many parents prefer to send their children to our school because we impart values and principles. **What are your requests to Muslim society?** First of all, we are asking to be welcomed, because we are all foreigners and a foreigner has no authoritative in other people's home. Officially, there are no Tunisian Christians. The Tunisian Constitution now enshrines freedom of conscience and this is a new development. But the mentality remains largely unchanged, perhaps things will change in the next generation. It's preferable to avoid provocations and make small steps. In Tunisia many hoped that the Arab Spring would work miracles, but it became clear that mindsets are hard to change. Employment levels are no higher than they were before. We are still at a teenage level of democracy. But time must pass. Moreover, there is no clear direction, especially now: we are without a government and we don't know what will happen next. **You meet many people from sub-Saharan African countries hoping to cross the Mediterranean Sea. What are you expecting from the meeting in Bari?**

I would like this meeting to send out a cry from Bari urging young people not to leave, to love their country.

Life in Europe is not as easy as one might imagine. Fleeing a country where there is war and hunger is one thing. But many believe they will find their 'Eldorado'. They would rather risk dying in the

Mediterranean than return home with shame and no money. In Tunisia we help them with small projects involving Caritas in the Ivory Coast, in Congo. We do what we can to contribute to the plane ticket back home. In Africa there is a saying that if only one tree is uprooted from the hill, there is no problem. But when many trees are uprooted, the hill is in danger of collapsing. We try to convince these young people not to leave their country. But the work must also be done upstream by the Churches of origin. **Can the collaboration with the Churches of origin be a question to be emphasized in Bari?** Certainly. I attended a meeting of African bishops in Uganda and I was very surprised: the problem of migrants was not a primary concern. That's because they see them depart feeling happy. But in Tunisia we welcome them and listen to their dramatic stories. Many of them passed through our Church and then left the Tunisian ports and arrived in Lampedusa. Or they went to Libya where they fell into the hands of traffickers, who requested large sums of money. Many die at sea and we must bury them. **Will the Mediterranean ever become a place that respects the rights and dignity of migrants?** I don't expect miracles. There are still many ships rescuing migrants, which means that the phenomenon continues. Italy encourages an attitude of welcome, to receive them with dignity, and this is only fair. But when those words are heard here they are seen as an invitation to leave. It's a wrong interpretation, which I hear young people who decided to leave repeat many times. They cling to every word to convince themselves that it's worth the risk. *This doesn't mean that people living in a country at war should stay and get killed. If they reach Europe they should obviously be welcomed with dignity and respect. But first we must ask ourselves what we can do for their countries.*

Patrizia Caiffa