

ANTIOCH, HAPPY OASIS of INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

By Egidio Picucci

Perhaps for the first time in countries with a Muslim majority the Parish Priest has had to post the visiting hours up on the door of the Catholic Church. This happened in Antioch, Turkey, where Capuchin Father Domenico Bertogli in order to ensure himself the time need for prayer has had to inform the numerous Turkish visitors, who are Muslim, that the *Katolik Kilisesi* will be open from 9.00 – 12.00 and from 15.00 – 17.00.

For people who are familiar with Antioch this information is “usual”, because, perhaps only here, peaceful co-existence and respect for the different religions go back to the time of the Apostles Peter and Paul. The city was then a hub of cultures, ethnic groups and religions; so rather than publicizing the last to arrive – the followers of Christ – they called them by a name that has endured through time: Christians.

Instead, for those who are not familiar with Antioch, it is a small/great revelation added to the many others in the *Annual Chronicle* Father Domenico writes and sends to the Pope too. This report is written with great exactness, to such an extent that tomorrow’s historians will not be able to pass it over without staking their own accounts’ credibility.

The “revelations” concern not only the interest around the chapel in the Catholic Mission, situated in an ecumenical triangle that is unique in the world (Catholic Church, Mosque and Synagogue are so close that they practically touch each other), but also city and national life onto which Father Domenico opens a window that is passed over by the large agencies. Who, for example, has ever heard of the “Choir of Civilization” that the Mayor of Antioch has formed with the participation of Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant singers to perform popular Turkish songs throughout Europe? Or, of the President of Religious Affairs, Prof. Ali Bardakoglu’s advise to Imams to conduct themselves in their respective offices like Catholic parish priests, by visiting families, instructing the young people and settling possible quarrels?

Among Catholics, who is aware that in Antioch for about ten years now the Orthodox and Catholic faithful celebrate Easter on the same Day? Indeed, they share the same *Caritas* office to help the poor; and learn that the “mission”, according to a group of French archeologists, is actually in the nucleus where the first Christian Community was founded, where the “domestic Church” was discovered?

These are small items of news, but precious tesserae in the mosaic in which the ecumenical Feast of St Peter is held in “his” Grotto on the 29th of June; young Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics attend the Community Prayer in the courtyard of the mission building. The Catholic Parish Priest enjoys the esteem of the civil authorities, to the point that the Minister of Justice, on the day of Msgr. Luigi Padovese’s funeral in Iskenderun, ordered the Police not to stop him for exceeding the speed limit, because he had to reach the mission in time for the festivities!

More interesting items report the visits of important people such as, Ministers of State, Ambassadors, journalists, producers, writers, to the chapel built in the mission, which is a small masterpiece in keeping with the ancient Eastern style. In addition there is a classical hint, into which icons, painted by a Muslim, fit well and glow like those in byzantine apses.

These bear silent witness to ecumenical encounters, to the Baptism of new converts, the visit of groups of young people who want to know about Christianity, of pilgrims who come or return to the ally-

ways of old Antioch which “to confirm history” refers not to Roman Times, when the buildings were surrounded by marvelous gardens boasting flora equal to the Riviera, but to early 800 A.D., to the period when the present district developed. This is such a vital place that the National TV Corporation has included Antioch in the series called “*Bir yer var*”/(There is a place), that broadcasts the county’s rare sites.

There are also wonderful “vignettes” described in a few vibrant words, such as that of: the Orthodox dentist, who died several months ago, who offered a rose to Our Lady every Saturday and distributed sweets to the children whom he treated gratuitously; the Imam who felt honoured by the friendship of the Catholic Priest; the old man who, in need of money to pay for an operation, begged a missionary to buy an old pendulum clock and dried a tear as he moved away looking at it for the last time; the girl abused by her father who asked for prayers; the “death” of Father Christmas, replaced by the Magi to restore the sacred atmosphere to Christmas; the Moroccan refugee who stole copies of the Bible in different languages; the Trappist nuns on their way to Syria to open a convent; the pilgrims crossing the vast plain of Athay on foot, luxuriant with vines and golden grain.

The parenthesis the *Chronicle* opens on national life focusses on news that is not published elsewhere, like: the abolition of the Visa between Turkey and Syria; a Turkish journalist’s indignant reaction to the negative outcome of the referendum in Switzerland on the building of minarets: (“Switzerland”, Serkan Ocak wrote, “reacted poorly, but is the Church truly free in Turkey?”); the inception of the umpteenth Party, TDH – Party for Change; the increase in the number of prisoners, which has redoubled in five years; upkeep of the Orontes River, an Imperial and Christian river, by reclaiming stagnant pools and malaria infested marsh; the economic crisis which even requires reducing the number of goats sacrificed at the *Kurban Bayram* (Festival of Sacrifice); **the first visit of a Turkish President to a synagogue (in Antioch, naturally), welcomed to the sound of a shofar**; the steady loss of power of the Army; the admission of a “plural Turkish identity”; the recognition of the existence of the Armenian/ Kurdish problem.

We all know that Antioch is more alive in the “Acts of the Apostles” than in the sites that remain: if one excludes St Peter’s Grotto, of friable rock which crumbles and blocks the entrance, the city is a photocopy of any Turkish town dominated by a mass of minarets. Father Domenico’s *Chronicle* annotates times, places and situations, and makes of Antioch a Sanctuary open to the sky, a place of the soul, a place of encounter for those who wish to immerse themselves in an atmosphere that retains the memory of the scenes and events that happened there and that no fanaticism can ever de-consecrate.