

## Olavsfestdagene 2017

*speech by Fader Dr. Alexi Chehadeh*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Bishop Helga Byfuglien, Dear the head and members of the national council of the church of Norway, brothers and sisters in Christ,

On behalf of the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development affiliated with the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, and in my own name, I would like to thank you for this invitation to attend the celebrations of this special feast of St. Olav. I am blessed, honoured and pleased to meet all of you, followers of Christ in this wonderful country.

Let me first express my heartfelt thanks for giving me the opportunity to give this speech on this day to this esteemed assembly of faithful, and to thank the Church of Norway and NCA for facilitating this trip. I take this opportunity to also thank you and NCA on behalf of all suffering Syrians for the support you give to our organization in Syria to assist them in many ways.

I also would like to thank Pof. Dr. Stephanie Dittrich who strengthened my relationship to the Church of Norway, especially through our common work as members of the international joint commission of the dialogue between Lutherans and Orthodox, and through other academic projects.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am coming from Syria, its history is witnessing the cultures of many civilizations, I am coming from Damascus, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, with evidence of inhabitation dating back at least 11,000 years; I am coming from the district of Damascus, where Saul became Paul, and from there he preached Christianity to the whole world. Therefore, Syria is not only the platform of many civilizations, but also the cradle of Christianity. I am coming from the See of Antioch, where the first Church was established under the gentiles (acts 11: 20-21) by both Saints Peter and Paul, and where the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). I am coming as your brother in Christ to share with you in an ecumenical spirit the blessings and happiness of this special week of St. Olav. Then to promote ecumenism and the inter-faith dialogue means we are trying to realize the prayer of our Lord in our life: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." I am here to witness with you that geographical distances cannot be an obstacle for sisters and brothers of one faith to meet and to enjoy the joy of togetherness, the right way to lean more from and about each other towards achieving the unity of the one body of Jesus Christ. I wish you joyful hearts in Christ and satisfied life in the service of His Church.

Sisters and brothers,

The persecuted but resurrected Christ teaches us that "No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well; if they kept My word,

they will keep yours as well" (John 15:20), then "in the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Christians in the Levant were periodically persecuted from the beginning of their existence, in Jerusalem, where the first Christian community was persecuted, and Deacon Stephen was killed as the first Martyr of Christianity, followed by hundreds of thousands of Martyrs during the first six centuries under the Roman Empire and later under the Islamic, Persian, Mongols, Mameluke and the Ottoman conquests. As a result of these conquests and attacks, Christians had to suffer under different non-Muslim as well as Muslim rulers. And today, the persecution of Christians by ISIS, not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, Egypt and other countries is taking place on a daily basis.

But the words of Jesus referred to by John the Evangelist say (15:20): "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well", as well as the words of Saint Paul: "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Colossian 1: 24), and some other verses alike, give Christians immense strength to survive throughout centuries until today. They learn every time of the persecution to "GET UP" and to continue practicing their faith. So, by the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the percentage of Christians in the Orient was 25% of the whole population in the Eastern part of this Empire. Today they are less than 2% in the Holy Land, 28% in Lebanon and about 5% in Syria.

However, and as always, despite living amidst war, terror, death, bloodshed and despair – Christians continue to believe in Christ whose light shines bright on them, proclaiming all together that their blood unified them and unified humanity worldwide, for that Jesus said: "Those who believe in me will live, even though they die" (John 11:25). This is Eastern Christianity - it is the faith in life and not in death; the faith that we are guests on this earth and our homeland is in heaven. We sacrifice ourselves for the mission of love and peace; it is the faith of forgiving and praying for those who kidnap, persecute, torture and kill us like our Lord did on the cross saying "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). So I would like to remind you of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:10): "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".

Having said this, I am not coming to you with the tears of fear and hopelessness, but with the tears of joy and victory over death. I am not coming to you to say that we need more jets for more fighting in Syria or ships for the transportation of Christians from the Middle East, but I come here with the light of love in one hand as a sign of hope, and an olive branch in the other as a sign of peace. I am not coming here to blame the rest of the society in Syria, for what is going on there, but to ask you to help us sit together and find a peaceful political solution. For that, I strongly believe that all of us will work together to end the almost 7 year war by any means possible. We will stay in Syria, because we are rooted there and we are one of the most important components of the Syrian society; we don't recognize ourselves as a minority in our Islamic environment, but we introduce ourselves to the world as yeast, a little of it can leaven the whole batch of dough.

We believe that we are not alone, even though we are being kidnapped, persecuted, tortured, killed, and the fate of the two kidnapped Metropolitans is still uncertain. Countless churches, monasteries, monuments, public buildings, schools, and hospitals are partly damaged or fully destroyed. But we still keep our faith and hope, that we are not alone and that we will tomorrow have a better future, because the only one who has trampled down death, will help us to overcome the crisis in Syria and rebuild it with His Grace and your prayers and support.

My organization, the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, established in 1994, and which embraces the Good Samaritan as its idol, is the largest faith-based and non-governmental NGO operating with 1050 Volunteers and 27 centers as well as reprehensive offices in 11 Governorates on the ground all over Syria. I can say that our only response to the violence and destruction brought about by religious extremism is to take care of those affected and to help them, comfort them, offer them medical assistance and aid in rebuilding their lives in different aspects. All we can do when confronted with this delusional and destructive ideology is to offer love and any resources we have at our disposal to those who have been so cruelly persecuted. Because of the sheer scale of the destruction in Syria, we are providing aid every year to millions of Syrians and to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis through different programs, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

The Syrians and the Iraqi refugees in Syria need our help and we need your prayers and support to continue our ministry which we have started as a church some 2000 years ago. We want to transform “Alam” which means pain, into “Amal” which means hope. Both words in Arabic have the same letters, but in different order.

I conclude with the words of His Beatitude John X Patriarch of Antioch and all the East: "Christians of the Orient are looking for someone to hear their call; but in vain. In our country, we are the ones who call for peace; we call for reconciliation, for harmony and fraternity...**enough** takfirism, terrorism, and garbling reality...the world would assist both Christians and Moslems much better if it spreads the culture of dialogue in our East and wipes away the culture of the sword”.

Let us work together to stop the war in Syria, to spread peace culture between the conflict parties, let us show the world that the peace of Christ is a joyful incident in our lives and in the lives of the faithful of other religions, for that Jesus says: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt 5: 9). When we have peace in us, we can give it to the world. Please help me to reestablish peace in my country without violence. I believe in the good found in man, for when God created man, blessed him and her, He found that everything was good. But unfortunately, we still have to experience the story of Cain and Abel every day in our lives, because of the lack of love, humility, sacrifice and patience we feel towards each other.

Please be our ambassadors to the whole world, ambassadors of reconciliation, love and peace, so please don't hesitate to appeal for peace and influence the decision-makers to save Christians through stopping the war in Syria, working towards a peaceful solution.

Thank you for your attention. God bless all of you.