

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 1, 2012 at 11:46am

Jesuit expelled from Syria says country needs regime change

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service



Two boys carry food down a street strewn with debris in Homs, Syria, July 19. An uprising against President Bashar Assad's government began in March 2011. Thousands of civilians have died in fighting since then, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. (CNS/Reuters)

ROME -- Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio was expelled from Syria in mid-June after he intensified his public calls for democratic change in the country.

"The blood on the ground must be respected and religious leaders must speak out," Dall'Oglio told Catholic News Service in Rome July 18.

The Jesuit had been based in Syria for 30 years, and since 1982 had been restoring an ancient monastery in the desert and forming a religious community dedicated to Christian-Muslim dialogue and harmony.

With the priest back in Italy and with Syria embroiled in violence, the Mar Musa monastery continues to operate "normally -- or as normal as possible in Syria today," he said.

Since he was kicked out of the country June 16, fighting has spread to Damascus, the Syrian capital, "which was to be expected," he said. "Whether it will be a momentary fever depends on how many weapons the opposition has. If they are able to get weapons, the revolt will speed up in the worst possible way," hardening positions on both sides and increasing the violence.

Dall'Oglio said the government initially asked the local bishop to send him home last November, but public support put the move on hold. Then, in late May, the rising violence made him feel he had no choice but to speak out more loudly. He published an open letter to Kofi Annan, the U.N. envoy to Syria, saying a regime change in the country was necessary in order to restore peace and bring democracy.

The letter, he said, "was the immediate reason I was expelled."

Syrian President Bashar Assad set himself up as the protector of religious freedom in the country and successfully convinced many religious leaders that Christian-Muslim harmony was his doing when, in fact, the country always had a cultural tradition of religious moderation and tolerance, the Jesuit said.

"Discussions with the regime were possible until April 2011" when the situation turned violent, he said. "Now with so many dead and injured, it makes it impossible, but the regime still has a base" of support, including among some Christian and Muslim leaders.

The Jesuit said Catholic and Orthodox bishops "were very active supporters of the government, but started speaking less after the first six months of the revolt" when it was clear Assad was losing popular support and his troops were seen as reacting with too much deadly force.

The bishops' initial position was understandable, he said.

"They are very much afraid" of a Syrian repeat of what happened in Iraq, where the end of a dictatorship launched power struggles and many Christian communities were caught in the middle.

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"When people fear so much that the Iraqi process will happen again, that ensures it will happen because it gives the fanatics power," Dall'Oglio said.

Up until now, he said, Syria has not had a problem with Christian-Muslim conflict "because of the culture and deep religious convictions of the people. It is the result of a deep faith. Believing Christians and believing Muslims live well together."

Unfortunately, "globalization is taking this tradition of harmony from the local society. There has been a globalization of tension" with religious fanatics spreading their hatred, he said.

With his visit to Lebanon planned for September, Pope Benedict XVI will have a perfect occasion and a very public stage for urging resistance to fanaticism, violence and interreligious tensions, Dall'Oglio said.

"He will have an opportunity to affirm that Christians not only respect Muslims, but they want to live together with them," following the law, promoting the respect of human rights and working together for the common good, he said.

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