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Road to Damascus still a place for conversions

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

The day our small delegation from the Woman's Global Peace Initiative arrived in Syria, CNN ran a ticker tape news flash announcing that a "huge storm was swirling around the tip of Saturn." I smiled at the sight of it. Frankly, I was more concerned about the huge political storm in Syria. Saturn, I figured would take care of itself. Syria, I wasn't sure.

The talk in Washington now may be of James Baker's Iran Study Group and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's commitment to reach out to Syria in order to engage with this regionally influential regime. But that was not the talk a week ago.

Up until Election Day, the United States simply refused to talk to Syria. Refused. The Syrian ambassador sat in Washington with no chance to be an ambassador. He was closed out of U.S. talks about Syria and the Middle East. Nevertheless, he heard on the television, just like everyone else, that Syria was on our "evil empire" list. Tensions were rising daily.

As a result, our delegation went to Syria with one thing in mind: We went to do some citizen-to-citizen diplomacy. We had been invited by the Syrian ambassador in Washington, Imad Moustaffa. "Come," he said. "See for yourselves. Our people need to see Americans who do not hate them."

Come and make a connection with the people, in other words, so that whatever enmity exists at the top, it does not poison the population, as well. It's so much easier to make people hate what they don't know than it is to make them hate what they do know.

We decided that this time we would go straight to the religious leaders of the country to ask them what kind of a place they thought Syria to be.

First we met with His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim, Patriarch of Antioch and the Entire East for the Russian Orthodox. He was very kind but very straight forward:

"We don't know the American people. We only hear the President . . . and we have a deep resentment about the image of Syria in the U.S. Syria is not an Islamic country. Syria is a secular state. . . . We are not oppressed as Christians. Look at our cathedral. It is no tent!"

His points were clear and the scene was set: Christianity was not being oppressed in Syria. Christianity was one religion among many there. Just as it is in the United States.

But what role does it play in Syria? Is it as a non-Islamic religion a dynamic presence in the society or simply a passive conveyor of ancient rituals in a secretly hostile environment? After all, it's bad enough to be called "unpatriotic" for talking to the enemy. You don't want to be used as part of the enemy propaganda machine -- a kind of modern Tokyo Rose whom it took almost 50 years to finally vindicate.

They would show us the modern church, they told us, in one of the oldest Christian populations in the world.

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Our first appointment, they told us, would be a trip to "meet with the Iraqis."

The Iraqis? What did that mean? We were, after all, in Syria.

As we wound our way back from the Patriarch's palace, through the narrow back lanes of the city, I realized that Paul of Tarsus had walked in this very area, too. "Not in this area," our translator said. "Paul walked here. Here. On this street. I will show you." And, all of a sudden, we emerged "on the street called "Straight" talked about in Scripture.

The impact of the statement was far more than biblical. Damascus is the longest continuously populated city in human history. More than 7,000 years old, they tell us. We were on the very street that ties the early moments of Christianity with today's struggles.

When the car stopped, we found ourselves in the front courtyard of a huge marble building. Fronted by narrow marble steps and great columned portico, it had all the marks of a standard Roman Catholic installation. Except that we were not in Rome. We were in a convent in Damascus run by a feisty old nun, Regina, a sister of St. Basil. It was a classic institution confronted by a very current situation.

The four sisters there work with Iraqi refugees. "Four thousand Iraqi refugees a day come to Syria," Sr. Regina told us. Whatever the daily figure, Archbishop Avak Asadourian told us later, more than a million Iraqis have fled to Syria for protection from U.S. bombs and their newly generated internecine strife.

The sisters feed the refugees three times a week on fresh soups and casseroles, vegetables, bread and meat donated by both the members of the parish and their Muslim friends around them. The people come with old pots and pans, the sisters fill them to the brim. The people take the food back for the rest of the family to make meals and home and family life as normal as possible in a totally abnormal situation.

Four sisters, older but undaunted, collect clothes for them, manage a medical clinic to care for them and try to get them housing. "Come and see them," she said.

I was a bit reluctant to go with her, afraid to embarrass them, concerned that the very presence of Americans could break the thin thread of strength that gave them a last semblance of dignity. But since she and I had made a personal contact -- she a Basilian, I a Benedictine -- she pushed me out into the midst of them in the inner courtyard where they were all watching us through the windows. I could hardly get out the door. They pressed around me, all talking at once. We were Americans and they knew it.

The rest of the time is almost a blur, meaning I don't know what happened in what order. But I do know what happened. I looked into their faces while the translator pointed each of them out: this one's son had been killed, these lost their homes, this one saw her family shot to death by American soldiers, these here have nowhere to go.....the list was endless. "I am so sorry," I said to them. "I am so sorry this happened to you. Many, many Americans tried to stop this. All I can do is apologize to you from the center of my heart for the millions of Americans who are concerned for you.

"And what good does that do?" a young teenager said, a sharp edge to her voice.

"They are still working very hard to stop this destruction," I went on. "Yesterday in a national election, American people said 'No' to the present direction. There is no way to justify what has happened to you -- and to your country -- and we know that."

Suddenly, a woman pushed forward from the back of the jostling crowd, big black eyes fixed on me intently. She turned to the translator for help. "I accept your apology," she said quietly. "I accept your love." Then she put her arms around me, kissed me firmly on the cheek, put her head on my shoulder and began to cry. And so did I. The rest of the group pressed tightly against us, all of them with tears on their faces.

I had never seen the faces of my victims before and they had not seen the face of the enemy who was not an enemy. It was a profound moment for all of us.

Then, the Rev. Joan Brown-Campbell -- chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women -- came forward quietly and began to do what ministers do: she made the sign of the cross on first one forehead, then another. And, instantly, the whole crowd fell into line waiting for the blessing, Muslims and Christians.

It was a scene of frustration, care, trust, anger, hurt and commitment I will never forget.

From where I stand, it seems that road to Damascus is still the place of conversion. Maybe before we name any more enemies, politicians should go there.

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