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Vatican says ?no confirmation? on death of Jesuit in Syria

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

A Vatican spokesperson said this morning that neither the Vatican nor the Italian government have any confirmation of reports that Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, a vocal critic of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, has been killed in Syria.

Multiple reports today cite the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claiming that Dall'Oglio, a pioneer in Muslim/Christian relations who lived in Syria for thirty years, had been executed by jihadist rebels in the city of ar-Raqqah.

?Activists in the city, and who are close to Father Paolo, have confirmed that the Italian Jesuit priest and the messenger of peace Father Paolo Dall'Oglio has been killed while in the prisons of the ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Levante], where he has been held for over two weeks,? the observatory said.

Lama al-Atassi, secretary general for the Syrian National Front, an opposition party, also wrote on her Facebook page today that Dall'Oglio had been executed.

Reached for comment by NCR, Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who assists the Vatican with English-language media, said this morning there is ?absolutely no confirmation? of that report, and that both the Vatican and the Italian government are seeking additional confirmation.

A 58-year-old Jesuit missionary, Dall'Oglio arrived in Syria in 1982 and spent much of his time rebuilding an abandoned 6th century monastery called Deir Mar Musa, turning it into a center for Muslim-Christian friendship.

Dall'Oglio launched the Community al-Khalil, or "Friend of God" community, promoting a more appreciative understanding of Islam among Christians and vice-versa. He's known among locals as "Abuna Paolo," meaning "Father Paolo" in Arabic.

Dall'Oglio also emerged as a leading critic of what he saw as human rights abuses and political oppression under Assad, which led to his being expelled from the country in June 2012.

Dall'Oglio spent much of the last year touring various parts of the world in an effort to raise support for the anti-Assad opposition.

Two months ago, Dall'Oglio posted an open letter to Pope Francis about the situation in Syria, among other things warning him against seeing Assad as a protector of the country's embattled Christian minority.

"Unfortunately, the Syrian regime has been very clever in using a certain number of clergymen, men and women, for its propaganda in the West, in which it represents itself as the only and ultimate bastion defending Christians persecuted by Islamic terrorism," Dall'Oglio wrote.

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Dall'Oglio slipped back into Syria in late July, reportedly to negotiate the release of hostages in the eastern region of the country and to press for a truce between local Kurds and the Syrian insurgents.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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