

Syrian Testimony

Vincentian Marian Youth

By: Aida Baladi

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

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:3-6).

The sound of the Lord came up from Damascus; the light of heaven shone on Damascus.

My name is Aida Baladi and I am responsible for the Vincentian Marian Youth in Syria.

Starting from the day that I was asked to write a testimony about the Vincentian Marian Youth in Syria until this specific moment, I felt terrified of the responsibility upon my shoulder since the request was to talk about the two most important things in my life: the Vincentian Marian Youth and my beloved Syria.

Therefore, I will do my best to use a couple of minutes to give the whole world through this Symposium of the Vincentian Family my testimony as a Vincentian Marian Youth member and as a Syrian citizen.

In order to simplify my mission, I asked for help from the most supportive group I ever met in my entire life: the Vincentian Marian Youth.

The question was also simple, “You are a member and leader of the Vincentian Marian Youth in Syria and you have been living under bad circumstances. Someone asks you about the Vincentian Marian Youth in Syria, what would you say?”

The answers were pure, specific, filled with love, ambition, determination, faith, and hope. Therefore, I simply quote the following sentences, which I will share with you:

First answer:

- ✓ “We have been through a disastrous war that forced us to put our scheduled activities on hold frequently. Now, and thanks be to God, we got through it and we survived. We learned from this war to appreciate things around us and to start from scratch. We are a family, a family who stands up for each other and we insist on delivering one message to the whole world that nothing can prevent us from continuing since we are the youth who have been requested by the Virgin Mary and we are going to continue with her blessing.”

Other answer that I got was:

- ✓ “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31. We will keep going with our slogan “Live” “Contemplate” and “Serve” through the Vincentian Marian Youth with the intention for each one of us. Now, as a responsible

leader, I will do my best to deliver the thoughts of “Life” “Contemplation” and “Service” to the younger generation of VINCENTIAN MARIAN YOUTH members.”

Also somebody answered me:

- ✓ “In this specific time we cannot give up on the Vincentian Marian Youth Syria. This is part of our childhood, part of our personality. Vincentian Marian Youth is a way of living. How would you give up on your life?”

And the last answer that I got:

- ✓ “The most important message we should deliver to the world as Vincentian Marian Youth is “Love” and the only thing that “love” requires is “Courage.” Because the person who loves does not let fear dominate him/her. Our country experienced an unfortunate situation that made us weak at the beginning but we did not allow the situation to stop us from delivering our message of “Love” and “Service.” Once this message is in our hearts, no crisis will expose us to despair. We were and still are showing the world that there is a light in the darkness.

Vincentian Marian Youth Syria is divided into four groups and each one has its own responsible person. The number of members has decreased drastically over the years because of the Syrian crisis; from 40 in each group before to only 15-20 now, especially with the younger group. From the beginning, we have tried to live our slogan: “Live, Contemplate, Serve” and through this we achieved many of our goals in living the Christian Life through the ways of Mary as told by Saint Catherine Labouré. Service was the core of our existence.

There was a period of growth and prosperity for the Vincentian Marian Youth in Syria when it was one of the most important Christian youth groups in our city, Damascus. We were known for our charity, volunteer work, and different activities such as fundraising events, summer camps, and prayer sessions.

When the Syrian crisis started in 2011, the difficulty of carrying out our activities also started. It affected us negatively. Our weekly meetings, camps, and other events were held mostly in the House of the Daughters of Charity, a place that we consider home, but it was in a dangerous area that resulted in cancelling meetings and activities.

Because of this circumstance, we had a shortage of human resources, most especially the ones whom we consider the backbone of the organization. The members, who were in their 20s, were the main support in carrying out the activities for the rest of the members. However, the former were planning to travel abroad because of the unfortunate situation. Because of this, the activities, especially those that would require offering service for others, suffered and decreased over the past seven years. But now we are trying to stand again. As the situation in Syria is getting better, we also try to be better. With last year's motto "*The good work grows in silence,*" we continue to strive every single day.

With the above-mentioned circumstances, we were placed in a difficult spot. We had to make hard decisions. Should we stop our activities permanently or take the risk of continuing regardless of the difficulties and danger surrounding us? So we made a decision. We decided to live. We continue to live because we are the Vincentian Marian Youth and we are Syrians. We live for the Association and we live for our dear country. This decision made us stronger than ever.

As a result of this decision, we are able to continue and start activities for the members. For example, since the war started we stopped having our annual summer camp. But in 2016, we courageously made the decision to revive it. This year, 2017, we even were graced by the presence of a dear friend, the International President of the Vincentian Marian Youth, Yancarlos, during our summer camp.

We now have Christmas parties, and we frequently participate in an “Atelier de Noël” [Christmas Workshop], which is a workshop for children around Damascus, not only for our members, to make handmade decorations for Christmas. We also had several sleepovers (small camp for two nights) in the house of the Daughters of Charity, the same place where we hold our meetings. This includes prayer time, games, and a lot of laughter.

In addition, I would like to emphasize the importance of some people without whose support and prayer, it would be impossible for us to continue: the Daughters of Charity, especially Sister Monique Kharouf, our adviser; the continuous participation of Father Charbel Naim, our chaplain, who started working with the Vincentian Marian Youth last year. He is giving us immeasurable advice. The spiritual life of Saint Vincent would not be present in us if not for these important persons in our group, Father Charbel and Sister Monique.

As a member of the Vincentian Family in Damascus, we are trying now to work with the other branches for one common goal, stronger together as we give life to the Vincentian Charism. Because of the situation in the past, and the better one that we have right now, we join forces towards our goal of Charity guided by the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The most commonly shared words used to describe our belonging are: Love without expecting anything in return, family, joy, light, way of living, strength together, message to deliver, sad and good times, duties and responsibilities.

With the country's situation, the important therapy for the youth is to be united in prayer, united in a place where we belong, and feel free to deliver one specific message through Mary to Jesus, to live the "Life" "Contemplate" and "Serve" as our slogan. In addition, we are all invited this year to participate in our Vincentian Marian Youth Syria theme, which is "I was a stranger and you took me in" Matthew 25. This is the plan for the next year.

Inside each one of us, there is "Love" which intensifies the sense of belonging and will develop happiness too.

Last but not least, I want to close this by saying that the seven years of war did not make us cowards. We did not run away. We did not hide. Instead, this war made us stronger, united, and bonded by our belonging to our country through belonging to the Vincentian Marian Youth in Damascus.

A special thanks to the responsible people who support us all the time, especially those who helped us participate in this Symposium: Father Ziad Haddad, Father Charbel Naim, Sister Monique Kharouf and others.

I am fully pleased and thankful to Pope Francis, who always prays for peace in our beloved Syria.

Peace for our Beloved Syria.