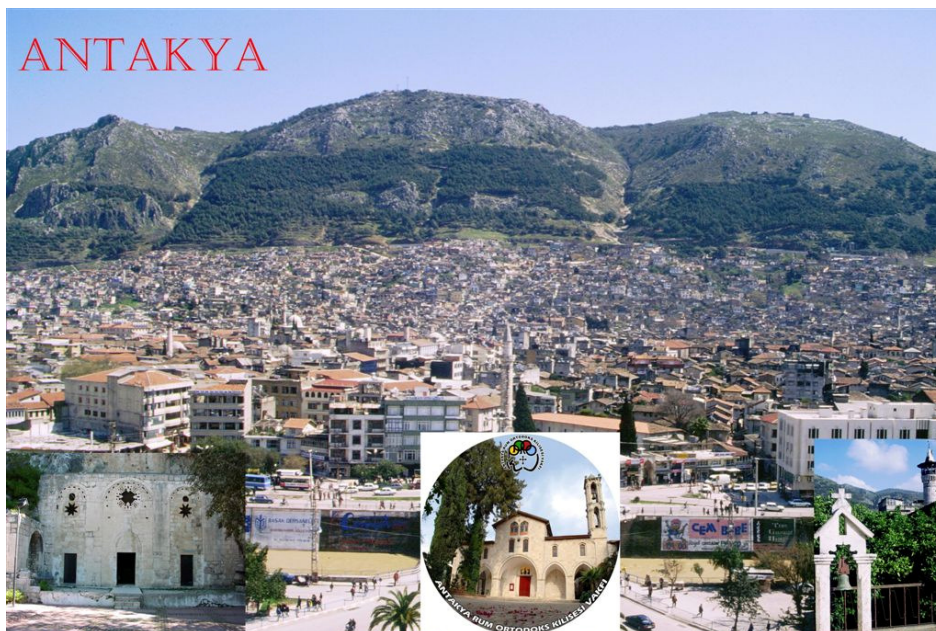


From SirEuropa 13.02-2009 (www.agensir.it)

Starting a new from Antioch --- "Where we were called Christians for the first time...."



Antioch is loaded with symbols and history pertaining to Christianity and to the Church. "This is where unknown faithful from Northern Africa and Cyprus proclaimed the Gospel to the 'Greeks' who accepted it. This where Paul founded the first community of non-Jews. It's from Antioch that Barnabas, Paul and Mark left for their apostolic journey starting world evangelization. The Council of Jerusalem was called in Antioch, the first Church Council. In this community the Caritas - or sharing - was born. When a famine broke out in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas collected aid, which they personally brought to the brothers of that city in difficulty. In Antioch the Gospel was proclaimed by lay people and the Church today is rediscovering the importance of the simple faithful". Father **Domenico Bertogli**, a Capuchin father who has been living in Turkey for the past 20 years, gave an outline of the events. He lived in Smyrna for 20 years serving a parish church on the outskirts of the city. Since 1987 he serves as parish priest in the city of Antioch. "Here - he proudly told SIR - the Catholic Church, located behind a mosque and near the synagogue, stands in the heart of the Roman quarter and precisely in the old Jewish quarter, where we were called Christians for the very first time".

Father Bertogli, a lot of time has gone by. Europe today finds it hard to rediscover its Christian roots. What is the message that this site can transmit to the rest of Europe?

"I believe that wherever it is, the Catholic Church ought to reflect today on how it proclaims the Gospel, especially by looking at Paul, the "missionary" par excellence. He encourages us to do so without "watering it down", focusing on the main proclamation: the died and resurrected Christ is Salvation for those who believe in Him reminding us that faith comes from preaching. If we drift away from the Cross of Christ then also the message of salvation will lose its force. The great Polish Cardinal Wisniewski used to say that Europeans "proclaim Christ without the Cross". Christ is indeed living and present in his Church, but he reached it through preaching, suffering and true death. Overlooking these passages is to miss resurrection".

An invitation to ecumenical - not only inter-religious - dialogue was launched from Antioch. What does a united and re-united Church have to offer to contemporary secularised Europe?

"While we live in an era that strongly needs 'unions' in the economic sector and among nations, as in the EU, the Churches ought to recover unity in order to bear witness to the Lord who sent two signs to enable us to identify ourselves as his disciples: love and unity. To make these signs of hope and salvation visible to Europe and to the entire world, Christians urgently need to live them so they can be light, salt and yeast in contemporary societies that are losing their original identity and values".

Thus the Pope's repeated appeals to the Christian roots of Europe have great topical relevance...

"John Paul II had himself called for the re-evangelisation of Europe. Today it is ever more evident how necessary this is, given the many nations marked by increasing egotism and atheism with ancient Christian traditions. The pioneering initiative of the Church of Antioch can serve as a stimulus to help European Churches recover the thrust of the Spirit that stems from preaching the Gospel. Evangelising thus means to evangelise oneself! I don't think that men today are very much different from those living in Antioch 2000 years ago".

Could the recovery of Christian identity serve to improve also the dialogue with Europe's Muslim community, which could soon be joined by Turkey's Muslim faithful?

"It may appear bold, but I believe that Muslims and the many Turkish citizens living in Europe should be given the possibility of encountering the Gospel. The words of John Paul II apply to them too: "open your doors to Christ". There are many conversions, and the Churches should take a greater interest in these people who seek a job, while offering them the encounter with Jesus".

Half way through the Pauline Year, is it already possible to establish the event's heritage to the Church of Turkey?

"The Pauline Year is a major opportunity for Turkey's Church, that is small and often lacking motivation. Once more we must have the courage to start anew as was the case in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. There are new proposals of re-evangelisation in the Church. Let us not forget the many non-Christians that include Muslim faithful, who knock at the doors of our Churches. Responding won't be an easy task, but survival depends on how this opportunity is grasped".

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