

Today's Martyrs – Father Frans van der Lugt SJ



The Syrian Civil War arguably began in the city of Homs, the nation's third largest. Demonstrations against the government of President Bashar al-Assad started there on April 17, 2011. By May 6 government forces had begun a siege of the city, triggering an armed confrontation with rebel forces that would last for three years.

A Latin-rite (Roman) Catholic priest by the name of Frans van der Lugt became a principal witness to this siege. Fr. Frans was a Dutch national, a resident of Homs since 1966, a trained psychotherapist, and a member of the Society of Jesus. He had ministered to the Christian population of the city, to people of all faiths with special needs, and worked to promote interfaith dialog. As the siege progressed the government began to restrict food in an attempt to starve the rebels, causing terrible suffering to those who were unable to escape the crossfires. In response Fr. Frans became an astute user of social media, using every available tool to tell the world what was happening to his friends, in the process describing how it was to live with nothing.

Fr. Frans wrote via email on September 28, 2013 that he now lived with 3,000 people including 100 Christians in a besieged area of 247 acres: "No food has entered our besieged region for more than 15 months. For months we were able to rely on local warehouses, but these are now empty. We are surviving on what little food remains in our homes, but we will be reduced to soon only find bulgur wheat, and then soon that will be gone, too. We thank God that each and every one of us still gets 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of flour a week, but we do not know how long this supply will remain available...Disease has captured some of us and is knocking on the door of others". Yet he was able to write "there is an atmosphere of love, openness and interaction, and those of us who remain feel that we are one group".

Conditions continued to worsen. On January 27, 2014 Fr. Frans posted a video to YouTube in which he said "Christians and Muslims are going through a difficult and painful time and we are faced with many problems. The greatest of these is hunger. People have nothing to eat. There is nothing more painful than watching mothers searching for food for their children in the streets...There are so many people here that need operations and or specialist medical treatment but have to wait a long time, and are forced to go through immense suffering".

A week later, on February 2, 2014, Fr. Frans said in a Skype interview that hunger had begun "turning people insane...Some people are now suffering from mental illness; neurosis, panic attacks, psychotic and schizophrenic episodes and paranoia. I try to help the mentally ill, not by analyzing their problems, as the problems are obvious and there is no solution for them here. I listen to them and give as much food as I can...Infants are suffering the most. Nursing mothers can't feed their babies as they are too weak from hunger. We search everywhere for milk, and when we find it we mix it with water".

After all this the end was still sudden and surprising. On April 7, 2014 Fr. Frans was pulled from the Jesuit residence and into its garden by armed men believed to be from the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. He was beaten and then murdered with two bullets in the head. Until the trigger was pulled he had kept silent, apparently afraid that had he made any sound others might have come to his aid and shared his fate. The refugees in the residence did not know what was happening until they heard the report of the rifle. He was 75 years old.

Thirty three days later the siege of Homs ended. A UN brokered agreement between the Syrian government and the rebels went into effect. The rebels left the city, and unhindered humanitarian aid then arrived. It is possible that the internet advocacy and internationally notorious death of Fr. Frans may have played a part in the ending of the siege.

Just days before his assassination Fr. Frans posted a message on Facebook that deserves to be widely shared. It described how it is to live with nothing, and yet with everything:

“Our faith helps us a lot to overcome this critical situation, provides us with hope and patience...Starving is threatening our lives, we miss the basic elements to survive, food and elementary needs...But somehow we are surviving, and push life forward. Moreover, we experience the goodness of people who are in need. They find some lentils and bulgur [all they can eat after two years] in front of their doors. Now, when we are poor and in need, we rediscover the goodness of human beings, when we receive from our brothers and sisters. We see evil is trying to find his way among us, but it can't turn us blind before the goodness...We are preparing ourselves to Easter, reflecting on crossing from death to resurrection. We feel like we are in the valley of the shadows, but we can see that light far away, leading us to life again.”

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