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The Church, a link of the territories of the African diasporas in Cairo?

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The discussion which follows has the aim to bring explanations on the subject of the Diasporas in Cairo, their transit and their settlement in and via the Egyptian capital. Indeed, whereas the majority of the studies made in this field concern the populations themselves, it appeared interesting for us to highlight more discrete, and therefore less analyzed aspects, i.e. the general problems of the migratory transit of the refugees and migrants in the city. In particular we were interested in the devices set up to accommodate them and in the actors behind this process.

We have consequently decided to have a discussion with a catholic priest, Father Aldo Berardi of the Trinitary Order. It was an occasion to continue a dialogue that had begun at an earlier time, when Father Berardi described us his experience as a priest in a Sudanese community of Cairo, and to look further into the way in which this action makes sense within the apostolic action of the catholic Church.

It is common to make a confusion between *the Church* as an institution and doctrine in which the faithful ones are recognized to share the same faith, and *the church* as the place where the faithful ones meet. It is common also to see in the first an instrument of religious proselytism and in the second an agency whose activities often resemble those of an NGO. The distinction must be made when treating the issue of the relationship of the religious authorities with the refugees and migrants. On the one hand, we want to understand how *the Church* is thought like a territory and how this territory enters in a relationship with that of the migrants and refugees. On the other hand, we will question Father Aldo Berardi on what differentiates *the church* from a NGO.

When a researcher is interested in the populations of refugees and migrants, he generally considers individuals as belonging to a group, which is itself identified by identity markers which are, in the case of the African populations in Cairo, national, regional, religious, ethnic or tribal. Starting from these common referents, the scientific community studies these populations: where do they come from? where do they settle? how? why? with what means? These questions are obviously put with more nuance and refinement and we are even tempted to excuse ourselves to render them here in such a blunt manner.

The point we want to make, however, is that the approach of refugees and migrants as members of a community defined by where they come from, where they live and where

they are going to, is no longer self-evident or even legitimate. A most striking phenomenon countering this view is precisely that of the construction of territories on the initiative of the migrant populations or refugees. To postulate that such constructions exist, even if they are often invisible, we must rehabilitate an axiom often neglected in social sciences research: those who move do not necessarily only undergo the movement, but they are also the actors of it. Names of cities, districts, roads, and borders that the migrants evoked when we questioned them are as many places constitutive of these territories. They often make sense only to individuals and small collectives. They are therefore part of an identity construction built in the movement, understandable only to those who live it, and often perceived by the others as mere 'wandering'.

One can guess how stimulating it can be to follow this way of thinking, which, by rehabilitating the space dimension of displacement and by reconstituting spaces which are the supports, as though it were parts of a puzzle, reveals an aspect of moving people which is often ignored: the legitimacy of the territory they build. This legitimacy is very often denied by the states which see in it a direct competition towards the territorial forms that they have built themselves, but also by the experts in development and humanitarian aid, who mostly focus on the problems at the scale of a group located in a precise place. But does this not involve an opposition between the movement of the ones to the sedentariness of the others, made by either the inhabitants of the place or by the institutions which usually deal with the refugees and the migrants? Consequently, do we not oppose a little too quickly, conceptually, territories limited by borders to territories in networks, the latter belonging to those which move?

Such questions are less theoretical than it appears at first sight because they put into context the presence of refugees or migrants in a precise place. And the city of Cairo is a stimulating place to analyze the articulation between various territorialities. Parallel to the significant presence in the Egyptian capital of refugees of the Horn of Africa, in particular of Sudan, are the reception and support services set up to help these populations. These are generally international (UNHCR), either humanitarian or denominational. But the distinction between civil NGOs and churches is often difficult to make in Cairo. Both engage in reception, formation, search for funds, social assistance and sometimes humanitarian aid. The most visible missions are those founded for the support of the underprivileged.

For these reasons, the role of the churches is often compared to that of the NGOs. But the Church, as an institution, does not see or think itself like that. Its basic vocation is to inspire the spiritual life of believers, to answer their spiritual needs, wherever they are. Isn't this another type of territorial strategy, in a transnational space? Is the territory of the Church, then, copied exactly on that of the refugees? Or does the Church, having

the vocation to help the refugees and other ‘underprivileged’ populations, refuse to tailor its own territory to that of those which it helps?

More detailed study into the role of the Church and its relationship with the migrants and refugees reveals the opposite. It shows a logic of accordance of the groups concerned with the actions defined by the religious orders. It also shows a reading of the world beyond the national borders, or, more precisely, transnational. The Church transgresses the official borders to put in adequacy its spiritual function in the living world as it is. It indeed tries to adopt the flexibility which is at the base of the daily life of those it wants to help, concerning the rules of the places they cross as well as concerning the limits posed to their circulation.

All things considered, this interview enables us to clarify a neglected but fundamental actor of migratory spaces taking shape in the contemporary world. An actor who, moreover, creates his territory in the margins of those of the states. Our objective was to understand how this logic is implemented, that is, taking which position vis-à-vis the authorities, but also having which connection to the territory that the migrants create.

Discussion with the Father Aldo Berardi

How to define the Trinitary family in the contemporary world, both on the spiritual level and on the level of its actions?

The Trinitary order is a redeeming order, composed of congregations which have a spiritual vocation (of which 5 are female, a secular institute and the lay presence); the religious life is the base of the order, and the apostolic action belongs to spirituality, it is not separate.

How does the order function on the institutional level?

Every six years a general chapter takes place. It is the meeting of all the superiors of the order. From the preliminary works and proposals of all the members of the order, written before the chapter, the superiors discuss on the mission of the Trinitary and elect a new general minister and his advisers. The decisions taken on this occasion have the force of law until the following chapter, after the Holy See has checked the canonicity (conformity with the canonical law) of the elections and the decisions.

The general minister, elected, therefore, by all the provinces of the Trinitary order, has the role of establishing the link between the communities dispersed throughout the world.

The new constitutions of the Order, since 1984, speak about an adaptation of the charisma of foundation to the new historical situation. Which meaning give, in this context, at the assistance to the refugees? How are they perceived and defined in the context of this mission? Are they, for example, the "prisoners of the freedom" of today?

The Order helps those who are persecuted because of their faith and justice. Thosa are the refugees.

This action often falls under the history of the order which helped, by repurchasing them, the Christian slaves at the time of the Crusades, then the Moslem slaves. Gradually a transnational network is created, founded on "houses" which accomodate the members of the order and the repurchased slaves. These "houses" in general were convents or hospitals located out of the cities.

Do these new constitutions not show a will to adapt the mission of the trinitarian

order to the map of the world? Indeed, it appears that Europe was, during centuries, the space of presence and action of the order. However, during the ten last years, the opening to the world is obvious:

- In 1995, the first trinitarian house is created in Congo and presented as, I quote, "the first link of the new trinitarian presences in Africa"
- Three years after the celebration of the final chapter of the Trinitarian order (when?), the movement of opening of Trinitarians in direction of the young populations of the Third World is launched.

During the 19nd century the Order is in a long crisis. In France, only Trinitarians and Mercedaires, which are redeeming orders at the time of the crusades, are not removed. The abolition of slavery involves the decline of the order which does not have then any more but one house, in Rome. But the order gradually redefines its mission, by taking account of the modern forms of slavery. It is the beginning of a new redeployment of the order on all the continents.

In parallel, the Trinitarian presences throughout the world are structured in networks: the communities of Latin America are in contact with the house of the order located in Spain, those of India with that in the United States, those of Africa with that in Italy, those of Egypt with the General Minister.

Thus, the new trinitarian presences in Western Africa are linked together. Indeed, all these centres must be thought like a network and not like isolated places.

Why the presence in Egypt? Why not Sudan?

Our will was to settle in Sudan. Contacts had been made over there in order to create an establishment in Darfour where the war prevails and where the traffic of the slaves is significant. We did not obtain the necessary authorizations. The choice of Egypt is thus a withdrawal solution; the forced migrants are fewer there than in Khartoum or Darfur and there are much more migrants, who try to leave Egypt as soon as possible.

Can the choice of Egypt also be explained by your will to establish in the Middle East?

Indeed, we also want to extend our action in the direction of the oppressed Christians (Philippinos, Indians and Pakistani) who work in the countries of the Gulf.

I would be tempted to say that the unity of the place created by the Church is religion-based, since it is based on the meeting of a confessional community,

whereas its openness is social, since it does not aim a precise public. What do you think of such a definition?

The openness of the order is based on religious hospitality but the context does not lend itself to such a formulation of the things. We would be accused of proselytism.

In these conditions, the creation of Trinitarian International Solidarity (TIS) appeared as a need so that the action of the order would adapt to the modern context of assistance to the "persecuted". It is in fact a NGO created by the Trinitarian order, resulting from the last reform of the Vatican II. It deals with matters of the human rights, in relation with international movements such Amnesty International or the Committee Against Modern Slavery (CCEM). Delegations of the TIS are established in all the countries where there are Trinitarians.

The Secretary of the episcopal Conference declared in India that the Church works for the poor and the forsaken areas. It is, indirectly, to offset the deficiencies of the state?

Yes, in a certain sense. But we strive towards a different logic, which is to help the "persecuted" and marginalized populations who often live in areas forgotten by the State. However, unlike the NGOs, the Trinitarian congregations withdraw themselves when the State begins to act.

When you say that "the community is created where live believing them", it seems to me that one returns to the principles of the Church of the first centuries. Which are then the principles which define the territory created in the articulation of the vocation of the order and the "request" of the migrants?

I would summarize it in five points:

1. Continuity

This aspect is significant. It is the same catholic Church which is in Sudan and in Egypt, with these characteristics which make up its own originality and to which it will be necessary to adapt. The universal Church comes within the scope of a concrete reality. Displaced peoples thus find their Church.

2. Recognition

This continuity is expressed in the recognition of its own family. One leaves towards an unknown land but an element of reference appears on the horizon: the Church in Egypt. It is known that the microbus drivers in Assouan, where the ferries arrive from Wadi Halfa in Sudan, do not warn their destination by shouting "Cairo, Cairo or Masr

(Egypt), Masr (Egypt)..." but "Sakakini, Sakakini..."

3. Confidence and safety

In the Church, a door will be always open for whatever it is. Even if waitings are disproportionate, a hand is tended, an advice given, a reference suggested... One left his parochial territory to fit in another parish. With a similar organization.

4. Membership

One finds oneself "at home". If the refugees reproduce a little of their country of origin, here Sudan, the Church does not escape from it. We recreate the Church of Sudan in the Church which is theirs with the risk to forget the Egyptian Church.

5. Fraternity

The life in Church is fraternal. People feel like brothers who share their resources and their richnesses, spiritual as well as material. There will be always somebody to accomodate, to help... to be there! Solidarity is always possible. It is registered in the heart of the ecclesiastic life.

I would like to develop some of these ideas with you. Let us start with the idea of the continuity of the Church, essentially universal. Isn't this continuity in contradiction with that of the state? Doesn't it create a transnational common space?

This transnational space is initially that of the migrants and the refugees. We adapt the Church to the territory of the migrants while answering their request, to structure the spiritual community.

As for the recognition, how is it expressed concretely? Which route carries out of Khartoum into *Arba ou nous*?

The Sudanese refugees who go to Cairo initially identify Sakakini, rather than the city. Sakakini is indeed the district in which the majority of the Sudanese refugees live, near the churches which are now identified as places of spiritual communion and social help. The churches are organized according to human realities they saw.

However, you are not established in Sakakini but in *Arba ou nous*, why?

There are in fact Sudanese communities in several districts of Cairo, in particular Sakakini, Arbaa ou nous, Maadi and Zeitoun. Each community has its identity and is supported by a different Order (obviously there is only reference to Catholics here): Combonians (Order created by a bishop of Khartoum) in Sakakini, Trinitarians in Arba

ou nous, Franciscans in Combonians with Maadi and Salesians in Zeitoun.

The most significant district is Sakakini, but the rise of the rents in the district have pushed the Sudanese to seek a cheaper district. Arba ou nous was a good option to us because it is an under-equipped slum, populated with Egyptians, Copts and Moslems, in the northern periphery of the city.

Having moved away from Sakakini, the Sudanese of Arba ou nous then asked us to establish a parish in the district. It is called Holy Bakhita, of the name of the holy Sudanese woman, sold like a slave and repurchased by an Italian consul.

How does one transform a parish into a spiritual and social centre, like that of Holy Bakhita?

The needs are numerous: initially spiritual but also humanitarian and educational. Let us specify that Holy Bakhita is managed by the Sudanese themselves, who define which are the expectations of the community: a doctor proposes courses of hygiene and consultations, language courses are offered to the children and to the adults (i.e. English and elimination of illiteracy).

I will conclude by questioning you on the Sudanese who left Cairo. The assistance of the emigrants settled in North America, Europe or Australia to their compatriots of Cairo corresponds for you to the extension of a symbolic territory. How is it set up?

When communities reform themselves in these places of asylum, they create quickly associations and cultural centres. To take the example of New York, when the local religious authorities noted the increasing presence of Sudanese, they called upon Sudanese priests to answer their request.

The Church thus becomes a link in the territory which the refugees extend while moving. In this way, the refugees and migrants and the churches help each other in the extension of their own territories.