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Review:

Adam Bujak, Waldemar Cisko, “Tragedia Aleppo” (“Tragedy of Aleppo”), Biały Kruk 2017, pp. 207

This album was created as a photographic record of a journey to Aleppo, a city particularly affected by the ongoing war in Syria. The date of publication is significant because the album was released in 2017, practically after the Battle of Aleppo (2012–2016). Thus, it is a fresh testimony of the material and spiritual damage done to this city and its surroundings. The book is a peculiar chronicle of a country devastated by the war by a well-known photographer Adam Bujak, winner of many awards (including the gold medal „Gloria Artis”) and companion of numerous pilgrimages of Pope John Paul II. Adam Bujak has released more than 100 albums in cooperation with the publishing house Biały Kruk, which prepared this publication too. As a guide on his journey through Syria, Bujak was accompanied by Fr Waldemar Cisko, director of the Polish section of the association Aid to the Church in Need, who has been involved in helping Christians in Syria for years. He also provided professional comments on the photos, because, not only does he have knowledge from his experience of multiple visits to these places, but also from the scientific work as a Professor of Theology at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. Therefore, in the comments we receive not only information about the subject of the photos, but also more general data regarding the geography of Syria (p. 16), the history of particular places (p. 27, 45), especially Aleppo (p. 89, 137, 139 – Polish thread, 141), the history and fate of Christians (p. 32, 34, 161), churches (p. 71, 150), figures and paintings (p. 78, 80–81) presentation of important figures, bishops (p. 69,

164) the economic fall of Syria as a result of war (p. 19), war in Syria (p. 100, 130, 149, 155) aid actions of the Association and the Polish government (p. 23, 104, 118, 122, 166, 183, 195). Professor Cisko's comments reveal, on the one hand, the nature of the accounts from the journey, explain, add to the stories whose frame is presented in the picture, and, on the other hand, are an expression of his convictions and give voice to persecuted Christians, and call for peace and justice. The form does not allow for deeper utterances, but we find in them reflections on Islamic terrorism, the ideological struggle showing the mechanisms of the demographic drain of Syria to Europe and the hypocrisy of Europe about the fate of Christians. The polemical attitude is palpable, although not exaggerated. In any case, it is not a neutral account, if ever that is possible for a war-torn country. It betrays an emotional and intellectual commitment.

In this double way, the album „Tragedy of Aleppo” documents in photographs and descriptions the tragic change that took place as a result of the war in this ancient Christian city. The whole album has been arranged according to the chronology of the authors' journey to Aleppo. The first part entitled „The Road to Aleppo” shows the crossing of the desert, which is not empty at all. There are refugee camps, traces of Bedouin villages, the city of Tartus, Marmarita, Crusader Castle, Hims and Jabrud. The second part is about Aleppo and contains the following subsections: Life is revived, First returns, Remember the gardens..., the misery of temples, Christ hope, the sick, the poor, the trusting. The album is crowned with a supplement in the form of photos from the pilgrimage of John Paul II to Syria, May 5–8, 2001 and the papal speech (pp. 197–207).

In the introduction (pp. 7–11) Leszek Sosnowski is committed and unambiguous in his assessment of the false immigration policy in Europe. In it we learn that Christians from Aleppo do not want to be refugees, they want to stay where they were born, even if they had to start all over again. However, they need help, which the great European powers do not want to provide. They would prefer to force young people, especially educated ones: engineers, doctors and the like, to emigrate to the West, to become workers in professions in which their citizens no longer want to work. Not only do they need a workforce, but because of the poor demographic situation, they also need future generations brought up according to the ideas of local ideologues. The album changes the view of the entire migrant movement, portrayed as a crisis of refugees fleeing war, so promoted by the European Union. It is therefore a specific ideological manifesto that goes against the promoted ideas, which is of great extra-artistic value. It is intended to prevent international opinion from forgetting the fate

of people living in destroyed cities in constant danger of war. The situation in the Middle East is a reproach to political decision-makers and a reminder to all Christians of their brothers and sisters living in the lands where Christianity was born and first spread. Aleppo is considered to be the longest inhabited city in world history. The bulk of this history belongs to Christians who, as a result of the latest war, did not flee to the great centres of Europe to become a labour force for the ageing Western societies, but, having taken refuge in the provinces and now they want to return and start all over again. Unfortunately only 20% of Aleppo has been saved and so they need support. The photographs show not only the enormous scale of destruction, but also the rebirth of life, the returning families with children and young people, which heralds the future well.

When looking at subsequent pictures and reading the comments, the reader has a double impression. First of all, the enormity of damage dominates. The ruins of cities, dilapidated blocks of flats and tenement houses, churches, deserted districts, streets full of debris and rubble, protruding concrete reinforcement wires, destroyed cars are all over the place. Add to that the fact that before the war everything was full of life. Aleppo in 2013 had almost 2 million inhabitants and a long history enclosed in cultural monuments, and thus, the real extent of the tragedy emerges. Secondly, rays of hope are breaking through the dark clouds because people want to start afresh, have faith in God's help, gather at churches where they receive help. The same can be seen from the faces depicted: pain, but also hope, we often see both tears of suffering and gratitude. The authors of the album managed to convey very strong emotions, which do not leave the 'reader' indifferent to the fate of Syria and Syrian Christians.

Very moving are the photos and comments devoted to religious topics, inseparably connected with life in Syria. Christianity in Syria is a colourful mosaic of different liturgical rites: Roman, Byzantine and Syrian. Within the framework of the Catholic Church there is the Melchic, Maronic and Chaldean Church, each with a long tradition. Christians in Aleppo constituted 10% of the population before the war. On the one hand, we have images of hatred for the faith and deliberate destruction of traces of Christianity in Syria, which has existed for 2000 years. It was created almost immediately after the Apostles spread around the world. Depressing are the pictures of destroyed religious architecture, even wounds inflicted on sculptures, icons and liturgical objects. They depict a wild hatred for Christianity. Someone had to destroy it on purpose, entering already ruined houses and churches to complete the work of their hatred. This can be seen immediately on the cover of the album, for which a photo of the

massacred figure of Christ on the cross with broken hands and bullet marks was chosen. It is impossible not to feel the pain in your heart. On the following pages you will find a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a destroyed face, broken icons, a mosaic of Christ's head shot in the eyes, a destroyed figure of St. Francis. Beyond this destruction we can perceive more in depth, because we can see the harmfulness of terrorism and religious fanaticism activated by the ideology of freedom and democracy coming from an unknown source outside the country. On the other hand, religious life, and with it, social life in Syria is revived. Its roots are deeply rooted: faith has taken root practically from the very beginning of Christianity and has grown with the culture, even if it is now in a dominantly Muslim state. Christians in Syria pray, find community and meeting places in religious buildings. There are youth groups, catechesis and community centres. The people there, thanks to the parish structures of the Church, often receive immediate and systematic help (pp. 188–195). There is a St. Louis Hospital, where doctors save human life and health in very difficult conditions (pp. 178–185). It is the smiling and hopeful faces of children and youth that move one the most (pp. 160–177). They show that good is stronger than evil and love is stronger than hatred. If we allow them to keep drawing this love from their Christian faith and give them the necessary care, perhaps another album about Aleppo will be published, as a testimony to the spiritual and material reconstruction of the city.

Thanks to the album, you can build a bond with Aleppo. The city, which was not very well known to the average Pole before the recent war, becomes very close thanks to Adam Bujak's work. The choice of the subject of the photos and their expression and details make us feel sorry for Aleppo and its inhabitants. As a result of terrorism and war we feel not only the harm of the inhabitants, but in a sense of the whole humanity in terms of cultural goods, and Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular. Love of neighbour does not only mean love for those who are closest to us, but for those who are most in need of help because they find themselves in life-threatening conditions. Compassion results in the willingness to help, and not only in the short-term. For we can see how great a role is played by ecclesiastical structures in situations of danger and loss of other points of support. During the war they become the only aid channel, and after the war they become the centres around which life begins to recover. This does not happen impersonally, of course, but there are priests behind it, who have stayed with their faithful, often risking their lives and health. After the war they become the *spiritus movens* for the people returning from their escape from

terrorism. Where the priests stayed, people usually stayed there and if they had to leave the place, they would eventually want to return to it. The album is an encouragement to get to know the Christians, our brothers and sisters in Syria, not as possible supplicants or immigrants, but as heirs of ancient Christianity, who can offer much in the exchange of gifts, if only they can be saved from destruction and uprooting. In addition, the pictures showing whole families who have been helped for a small amount of money for European conditions are testimony to the already existing bond between Poland and Syria.

The album is therefore unique, but its uniqueness does not lie in the artistry of the photographs, although these are, of course, as professional as possible in terms of technique, but in the chosen subject matter of the photographs and comments. It depicts the war against God and his people which, despite many blows, has failed to overcome the spirit of Syrian Christians and the people of good will who support them.