

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 3, 2013 at 10:41am

Syrian bishop says nuns' kidnapping shocks, frightens Christians

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — The kidnapping of five Orthodox nuns from a Christian village near Damascus has shocked Syria's Christian community and filled many Christians with fear, said Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo, Syria.

Speaking Tuesday to Vatican Radio, Audo said the latest information is that the superior and four of the nuns belonging to the Orthodox Monastery of Santa Tecla in Maaloula were kidnapped during the night Sunday and taken to Yabrud, a city nearby.

"We have no more information," he said.

Most media reports on the kidnapping, including by the government's Sana news agency, speculated the kidnapping was the work of the Al Nusra Front, which the U.S. State Department defines as a terrorist organization linked to al-Qaida. Early reports said 12 nuns were kidnapped.

Audo told Vatican Radio, "Maaloula is an important symbol not only for Christians, but also for Muslims in Syria and throughout the Middle East, because it is known that people there still speak the Aramaic dialect, the language of Christ. That is one of the reason people are so struck" by the kidnapping of the sisters and the rebels' capturing the town in early December.

As for the motive of the kidnapping, Audo said, "the first reason is the war."

"As Christians, as the church in Syria, we don't want to say this is a war against Christians because we want to be a presence for reconciliation and coexistence. That is our vocation. We don't want to create provocations with the Muslims."

However, he said, Christians feel more threatened now because the kidnapping has brought the war "to a sacred Christian place, one where for centuries nothing like this has happened."

Maaloula is about 35 miles north of Damascus, the capital of Syria.

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