



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“Flow of Christian pilgrims to Holy Land increasing”

Interview with Msgr. Leopoldo Girelli, Apostolic Nuncio to Israel and Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine



Monsignor Leopoldo Girelli, one year from the beginning of your term of office in the Holy Land, where the problems are unfortunately numerous, do you have objective reasons for hope and what are the good news you wish to share?

In the year since my arrival in the Holy Land, on November 27, 2017, the situation in the Middle East region has developed in different ways, presenting a certain stability in Iraq, but a persistent conflict in Syria and the growing tension between Israel and Iran. Furthermore, the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem constituted a further obstacle to the peace process in the region and in particular in relations between Palestine and the United States. The clashes on the border between Gaza and Israel have resumed, with numerous victims, followed by periods of precarious truce. The US administration of President Donald Trump is considerably reducing aid to the Palestinians, while Palestine appears increasingly isolated even from the Arab Gulf countries.

In this context, I would say that the objective reasons for hope are very few and weak. At the same time, this situation of great uncertainty could give rise to new developments, hopefully towards a more stable and peaceful structure for the Holy Land and for the entire region. The Holy See continues to support the need for dialogue and therefore the resumption of negotiations between Israel and Palestine. The Holy Father Francis reiterated that “Only a solution negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians, firmly desired and promoted by the International Community, will lead to a stable and lasting peace and guarantee the coexistence of two States for two Peoples”.

I believe that the leaders of the two countries should adopt a more pragmatic approach to achieving the desired result. In short, the hopes remain such, just as we wait for good news.

However, personally, I have reason to rejoice at how I was welcomed by the Church in the Holy Land and by the Israeli and Palestinian governments as a Pontifical Representative. I noted respect and appreciation for the positions of the Holy See regarding the question of Jerusalem and the Palestine, as well as esteem and consideration for the dedication of the Holy Father to the cause of peace in the region and in the world. Another positive aspect is the flow of Christian pilgrims which, in spite of everything, has not decreased during this year, rather it has increased, especially from Asia, proving that the holy places are a desired destination and a profound pilgrimage experience of faith both for ecclesial communities and for individual believers.

Can you outline the important issues facing the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, the progress of the negotiations, in particular about the agreement between Israel and the Holy See?

Christianity is persevering in the ongoing effort to preserve its presence in the Holy Land, threatened by a decline caused by many factors, political, economic and even religious. In this context, the Catholic Church has implemented various initiatives in favor of Christians. The Holy See, in particular, has negotiated agreements with the State of Israel and the State of Palestine that contribute to ensuring conditions of stability for ecclesial and religious institutions in the historical changes that have occurred in the Holy Land in the last 70 years. The known episode of the closing of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre last February was a further sign of the opportunity for the Catholic Church to reach agreement on economic and fiscal matters between the Holy See and Israel. In November 2016, these bilateral negotiations were resumed.

A recently passed law in Israel, on the Nation-State of the Jewish People, has provoked heated reactions, in particular from the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. What is your opinion on this subject as the Holy See representative to this country?

Indeed, the new Law on the Nation-State has aroused and is still provoking considerable reactions. As a Pontifical Representative, I do not intend to enter into the merits of it, as it is a law passed by the Knesset, which is the organ of the democratically elected State, representative of the people and legislated to legislate. Rather, it is the voice of the local Church that has the right and the duty to pronounce itself, as indeed it did in the statement issued by the Latin Patriarchate.

In it, the new law is described as “exclusive rather than inclusive, disputed rather than consensual, politicized rather than being rooted in the basic norms that are common and acceptable to all fractions of the population”. Furthermore, it is stated that “the Christian citizens of Israel have the same concerns as any other non-Jewish with respect to this Law. They call upon all citizens of the State of Israel who still believe in the basic concept of equality among citizens of the same nation, to voice their objection to this law “.

You meet Catholics in the Holy Land regularly, in Palestine and in Israel. What are the characteristics of these different communities and what do you consider the priorities to be taken into account in their support?

Catholics of the Latin rite in Israel and Palestine are two distinct communities for their different languages, Hebrew and Arabic, and for their ethnic composition, but part of the same ecclesial reality that is the Latin Patriarchate.

In Palestine, the parishes are still numerous. For decades, there has been a decrease in the number of faithful, especially young people, who migrate in search of better living conditions, because of the insecurity that reigns in this region. By visiting the parishes, to bring them the support and blessing of the Holy Father, I have been struck by the sense of belonging and desire to affirm the Christian identity. There are established charitable and social institutions, such as the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul and the Scouts, and religious institutions, such as the long-standing Legion of Mary. There are parish schools that play an important educational role and are a source of dialogue and peace in society. However, they find themselves in economic difficulty and they experience the challenge of maintaining their Catholic identity, having to welcome Muslim students, because of the decrease of Catholic ones. The clergy is dedicated at a pastoral level, respected by the faithful and shares the destiny of the Palestinian people.

The Catholic Church in Palestine receives economic support from the universal Church, without which it would be difficult to continue and carry out the religious, educational and social activities which are essential to ecclesial life. At the same time, it is necessary to promote in the faithful the sense of responsibility and participation for a better awareness and a greater commitment to contribute to the life of the ecclesial community.

In Israel, the Catholic Church of the Latin rite, as well as various parishes celebrating in Arabic, is present with a community in Hebrew that is rather composite and even variable, since many migrants of different origins are part of it. Pastorally and socially it appears lively as well as growing. It can be said that it is a highly symbolic reality, representing the Church of Christ within His people.

The Catholic communities of the Melkite, Maronite, Greek-Catholic, Syrian-Catholic and Armenian rites that exist in Israel and Palestine also face the challenge of the dwindling number of the faithful and clergy as well as the scarcity of resources. They express the richness of faith, of liturgy, of the identity of the Christian East that must be protected. Moreover, being part of the Catholic Church as such, they are faithful to the Holy Father and attest to the universality of the Church of Christ, not only geographically but also in temporal terms, referring to the origins of the Church that is present in the Holy Land in a peculiar way with various rites of equal dignity.

Can you share your reflections on the Order of the Holy Sepulchre with us, the relevance of its mission and its role in helping the inhabitants of the Holy Land face these challenges?

I have long known the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and now in my mission in the Holy Land I am a direct witness of its admirable work in sustaining the Christian presence in the territories where the Son of God, made man, lived and died and rose again.

During the past year, I met the Governor General of the Order, Ambassador Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, on two occasions, to whom I wished to express my heartfelt gratitude for the generous help and fervent testimony of Christian solidarity of the Knights and Dames towards the Church that is in the Holy Land.

The safeguarding of the Christian presence, as the mission of the Order, is carried out by promoting the coexistence of peoples, cultures and faiths, which has in its education its vital fulcrum. Support for Catholic schools and educational activities is a priority in being close to the Christians of the Holy Land who face the challenges of building peace and of witnessing to the Christian faith every day.

Interview by François Vayne

(September 2018)