“We believe in Jesus and we speak Hebrew”

Interview with Deacon Benedetto Di Bitonto of the St. James Vicariate led by Father Rafic Nahra, Patriarchal Vicar of Hebrew speaking Catholics

How is the Vicariate of St. James organized for Hebrew-speaking Catholics, how many faithful do you count and in which cities mainly?

Our Vicariate is made up of small communities, of which only two are parishes, where everything takes place in the Hebrew language, from the liturgical celebration to pastoral action. Our great handicap is the scarcity of adequate structures and funds to carry forward the numerous initiatives that grow from year to year. Thank goodness, there are Christian organizations that support and fund us with their contributions; otherwise, we would be unable to accomplish anything. The Order of the Holy Sepulchre has a fundamental role in this support, and we are deeply grateful to you all. I do not know the exact numbers of our faithful, but I know for sure that in the last ten years we have grown in participation. Since 2010, we have also discovered the great world of migrants and foreign workers, who number in the tens of thousands here in Israel. Since then we have been caring for their children with targeted initiatives: kindergartens, catechesis, school camps 4 times a year, formation... Since I have been here, I find myself among children of all origins, and we all have two things in common: we believe in Jesus and we speak Hebrew. A decidedly unique experience for which I thank God sincerely.

A deacon since June 2018, soon you will be a priest, a member of the St. James Vicariate of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem: can you tell us what your mission consists of, how your days unfold and what is the fulcrum of your pastoral action?

In 2011, returning from the WYD in Madrid with our youth group “Perah ha-midbar” (Desert Flower) I spoke with the then Patriarchal Vicar, Father David Neuhaus, with whom I lived in community for 7

years, and I expressed my desire to become a priest for the Vicariate. As soon as I finished my PhD, I was admitted to philosophical studies, and then to theological studies. My path was not entirely easy because for all the six years of study I was the only seminarian for our Vicariate. This has a little influence on my perception of formation, but in the end it is more for the better than for the worse, because it opened me up to form fraternal relationships with more young people who are also in religious formation: Franciscans, Salesians and Arab seminarians of the patriarchal seminary of Bet Jala. In the end, I am a son and brother to everyone.

During these years Father Rafic Nahra, today our Vicar, accompanied me and followed me. I live in community with him and with the priest in charge of the community of Jerusalem and others who come to stay with us for periods of varying duration. Together we pray the Morning Prayers (in Hebrew). During the day, everyone is busy with his commitments. If our lunchtimes coincide we take advantage of the time to update each other, but our days are rather hectic and each of us is engaged in a particular area, so that we do not always meet “in the field”, but in the evening we always come together for Mass and dinner.

The task of the St. James Vicariate is to ensure pastoral assistance to the Catholic faithful who live in the Israeli society, who speak the Hebrew language, and constitute a unique event in history, from the times of the early Church: to be a Christian minority within of a strong Jewish majority. This essentially means ordinary (parishes, catechesis, sacraments, service to the poor and the sick ...) and extraordinary (school camps for children, special activities for families, care and accompaniment for young people, pilgrimages ...) pastoral care.

Catholics are often unaware of their Jewish roots: how does the St. James Vicariate help the Church return to its spiritual origin, especially in liturgical formation? Do you organize meetings between Catholics and Jews, as well as days for exchanges and sharing? Does your experience have an echo on a universal scale?

There is no doubt that our faith was born in the bosom of the Jewish people and that as Christians we owe much to the People of the Covenant. What is important for us is the expression of our Christian faith and our Catholic identity in a language and in a form that is related to the culture of the society in which we live.We do not want our faith to be perceived as something exotic and foreign to the world in which it was born and formed. This means, for example, that our places of worship are very simple, there are not many images (we have no statues, for example) nor are there practices that belong to more Western European Catholicism. Although profoundly Catholic, in our communities, for example, one would not easily find a relic to venerate or a novena dedicated to one Saint rather than another. The emphasis is more on the Word of God, on the biblical experience understood in the light of the tradition of the Church, on an essential but dignified Eucharistic celebration, on the conviviality of a community on a human scale, in which we all know each other and we all can support one another. All of this undoubtedly prepares the ground for a serene and convivial encounter with our Jewish friends, who find in us a reality that does not frighten them but involves them in a bond of sincere friendship, in which differences are valued and never overlooked.

The Eucharistic celebration is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, and it is good to deepen one’s knowledge of this reality, being, however, careful not to fall into the sentimental and somewhat simplistic attitudes of those who want to imitate certain Hebrew customs at all costs, affixing them to the Christian liturgy, especially those rites that developed later in Christianity. This is not what I am talking about, I am speaking rather of deepening biblical Judaism, and the one that Jesus, His mother Mary and all the Apostles certainly knew and practiced. Above all to accept the fact that the event Jesus Christ is a watershed in the history of humanity that cannot be ignored or neutralized. The separation of the Church from the Synagogue is something that is hidden in the mystery of God and will only be revealed to us at the end of time. Until then, however, we can still learn to really know

each other, to respect each other, to have mutual esteem and work together for a world more similar to the vision of God.We also view Muslim believers in this light, rightfully members of the family of the children of Abraham, who like us have a responsibility to spread the light and love of God, Who loves us all, in the world.

Interview by François Vayne

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