



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

*At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land*

**“Education is the only resource we have, it is more important than food.”**

Visit to Palestine and Israel by the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium



**From 9 to 15 March, the three members of the Holy Land Commission of the Grand Magisterium - its President Bart McGettrick, as well as Tim Milner and Detlef Brümmer - undertook their half-yearly visit to the people concerned by the projects of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem that the Order supports financially. They were accompanied by Donata Maria Krethlow-Benziger, Lieutenant for Switzerland and Liechtenstein, Donna Milner, and the Order's Communications Director in Rome, François Vayne.**

During an initial meeting at the premises of the Latin Patriarchate with Sami El-Yousef, Chief Executive Officer, and his staff, it became clear that the current priorities, in a context marked by war, are job creation and education. Faced with the major crisis in Palestine which is having a terrible impact on tourism and pilgrimages, many Christians are choosing to emigrate when they can, while others depend heavily on the Patriarchate's assistance. The parishes of Palestine - in Taybeh, Ramallah, Jericho, etc. - write emails to the Patriarchate every day on behalf of families in increasing economic difficulty, in relation to the cost of schooling, the purchase of food or medicines. Jewish settlements are multiplying and the Arab towns are in a state of siege, encircled by dozens of checkpoints that prevent freedom of movement.



On the first day, Monday 10 March, the Commission went on site to assess the situation in Beit Jala and Bethlehem. At the seminary of Beit Jala, the “heart of the diocese”, where priests have been trained since the Patriarchate was refounded some 170 years ago, Father Bernard Poggi, the rector, explained the visa problems for the seminarians from Jordan which is part of the territory of the Latin Patriarchate. He wondered whether an annex to the seminar should be created in Jordan, given the regional political context. On a practical level, he submitted to the Commission a project to repair the building’s water circuit, since bacteria infested it.

At Bethlehem University, alongside the Vice-Chancellor, Brother Héctor Hernán Santos González, the Commission met young students who described, sometimes in tears, their suffering at being confronted with humiliation at checkpoints, while they want to attend classes. “Education is the only resource we have in Palestine, it is more important than food,” they said basically. They also stressed the hope represented by the AFAQ project, which enables young students to find employment opportunities thanks to the University’s collaboration with the Patriarchate, on the basis of the aid sent by the Order (the Order’s overall aid corresponds to 25% of the Patriarchate’s annual budget).



The following day, Tuesday 11 March, the Commission visited Ain Arik, then Ramallah, where the Holy Family is said to have gone, on the Roman road between Nazareth and Jerusalem. Focusing on the theme of education and support for young people, Father Firas Abedrabbo, the parish priest of Ain Arik, told the visitors how Muslim parents intervened to save the local parish school, wanting their children to be educated there, without the threat of fundamentalism. Together with Father Louis Salman, who is in charge of the youth ministry in Palestine, the parish priest then offered a tour of the centre which was built high up on the hill above his church to accommodate the activities of young Christians from all over the area.

In the afternoon, the director of the Patriarchate's thirteen schools of Palestine (two of which are in Gaza), Father Yacoub Rafidi, the parish priest of Ramallah, organised a meeting with his team, highlighting the difficulty to attract teachers because of the low salaries offered in the Catholic education sector, with many young people preferring to opt for other careers. Increasing teachers' salaries would enable the Catholic educational system to become stronger in the future. The parish priest of Zababdeh, near Jenin, who was present at the meeting, spoke of the efforts made by teachers to give online courses, as many pupils are stuck at home because of the checkpoints, terrorised by the Israeli patrols of armed soldiers and tanks that criss-cross Palestine, in constant violation of the Oslo agreements.





On Wednesday 12 March, the Commission travelled to Galilee, in the North of Israel, to Haifa and then to Reineh, not far from Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. In Haifa, the head of youth ministry in Israel, Father Ramez Twal, invited the Commission to a tour of the recently opened centre for young people and families. He presented the initiatives undertaken for young people, many of whom are Melkite Catholics, with a large prayerful and festive meeting every 25 November, on the feast of Christ the King, and this year a pilgrimage to Rome.

In a video conference from Milan, where he was travelling, Mgr Rafic Nahra, Patriarchal Vicar for Israel, described the secularisation of the Israeli society, which does not encourage openness of heart to God and to others, making it difficult to propose Christian faith to young people and families. Despite these societal obstacles, Father Elie Kurzom, who is in charge of pastoral care for families in Israel and has a dynamic team behind him, shared his hope with the Commission at a time when he is preparing a Jubilee pilgrimage for families to Rome, scheduled for next May.



The visit continued in Reineh, an Arab town in the North of Israel, where Father Ibrahim Shomali - the parish priest responsible for catechesis in Israel - testified to the vitality of the Church locally, explaining that 85% of the pupils of the parish school are Christians and that it is therefore important to invest in this area for the future.

On Thursday 13 March, back in Jerusalem, the Holy Land Commission , accompanied by Dima Khoury, in charge of social services at the Patriarchate, visited Christian families housed in flats in the Old City thanks to the Order. These people told their stories with dignity and courage, all insisting on the priority of their children's education over food, most having not eaten meat since Christmas and others having had a few pieces of chicken offered by Muslim neighbours during Ramadan.

A meeting followed at the premises of the Patriarchate with Father Mathew Coutinho, Head of the Vicariate for Migrants, and his collaborator Sister Gabriele Penka, highlighting the drama experienced in Israel by migrant Catholic workers (about 70.000 people from Asia or Africa), whose situation is very precarious.



Their presence is nevertheless a sign of the universality of the Church.

In the afternoon, a video conference enabled the members of the Commission to speak with Father Gabriel Romanelli, live from Gaza, while the truce had not been broken yet. The parish priest of Gaza spoke of the desperation with which his parishioners are trying to survive, with no water or electricity, the children being taught with the means at hand, on every floor of the Rosary Sisters' school - the only one still in use in the enclave - including in the kitchen and on the balconies.

At the end of that intensive visit to Palestine and Israel, a concluding meeting was held on 14 March with the staff of the Patriarchate's administration, for an initial presentation of the Commission's report, focusing on aid for employment and education. The Commission's next working visit is due to take place in Jordan next autumn.

**François Vayne**

*(March 2025)*