



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“A Muslim leaving our schools will never become a fundamentalist”

Interview with Fr Faysal Hijazen, director of schools in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem



Could you describe the network of Catholic schools in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem? How many are there, where are they located or situated, how do they function?

The network of Catholic schools in the Latin Patriarchy extends through the entire territory of the Patriarchate: Israel, Palestine and Jordan. There are 3 schools in Israel and 5 nurseries, welcoming 2,700 pupils. In Palestine there are 14 schools and as many nurseries, for 6,200 pupils. In Jordan the numbers are greater: roughly 10,000 pupils attend 25 schools (and as many nurseries). Each school functions in line with the parish. The schools are situated mostly in villages, welcoming both Christians and Muslims, putting themselves at the service of the poorest. The network of schools functions in line with the different ministries for education. There is one General Management in each country and each functions in line with the others. This cooperation serves the unity of the mission of the Latin Patriarchate.

Why does the Patriarchate give such pastoral importance to these schools where a great number of Muslims are also welcomed?

Education is an important sector of the Latin Patriarchate. The first reason is that through education, we can target the human person in the totality of its identity; in order to strengthen the faith of the people, we must be present in society carrying values of respect, of acceptance of others.

Pastorally, the schools allow us to practice the different Sacraments close to the pupils. Religious lessons enable Christians to deepen their knowledge of the Bible and to strengthen their faith. Celebrations organised in the schools for the different liturgical seasons (something made possible

by the presence of a school near parish churches) enable us to live unity with Christians, because all Christians come, no matter what rite.

We must also understand that the school and the Church nourish one another: the parish is made strong by the visibility it is given thanks to the school. Families get to know the Latin parish church and enroll their children here. The parish priest is visible at the school and close to the parents. In the same way, the school is present in the heart of the society thanks to the church. The parish priest makes the school known.

Muslims are welcomed in these schools and attend Islamic religious lessons all along their academic life. Their presence in the school is a chance for the Latin Patriarchate to teach values like openness to others, respect, and values which in themselves are fundamentally Christian: love of your neighbour, forgiveness. A Muslim leaving our schools will never become a fundamentalist.

What do you do to develop a culture of openness and encounter in the schools of the Latin Patriarchate, by what sort of initiatives?

The Religious lessons are mixed, one hour a week, Christians and Muslims. We study big themes which are for example “Living together”, “studying together”, “meeting the other”.... the rest of the time dedicated to religious classes is spent according to the religion of the pupil.

And so daily life at the school is a meeting with the other. The teachers who form a class seating plan, don't verify who is sitting next to who according to their religion. The children who play in the playground, as a cashier, as a teacher, at football, with marbles, they play together without asking the religion of the other. The schools in the Latin Patriarchate enable us to build bridges between religions, between different cultures. These bridges go over the walls which often surround our hearts.

What can we say today about the academic situation in Gaza?

The situation in Gaza has calmed a little, so we hear less spoken about it in the media. The academic life follows its path as normal. However, the human situation is a catastrophe: great poverty and an abyss of suffering are exhausting the people. The only opening to the world, the only ‘distraction’ is school. We must not forget the children of Gaza who are like children who have been refused fundamental rights, the primary rights. Where is the Declaration of the Rights of the Child for this land?

How is the situation evolving for Christian schools in Israel?

After the September strikes, the schools have taken up business as normal. Negotiations with the Israeli Minister of Education advance. We rest hopeful in reaching a solution which assures a full recognition of our particular identity and which respects the importance of these schools within society and in their mission concerning, not uniquely, the Israeli Christians.

How is the action of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre essential for the educational work of the Latin Patriarchate?

Let me be clear: without the support of the Order, our schools would have closed a long time ago. An education without material means is an education which dies very quickly. The Order keeps the mission of education in the Latin Patriarchate alive.

What do you see as the future for all these schools and what message would you like to pass on to Western Christians?

Our schools should respond to the needs of a society faced with an increase in fundamentalisms. The future asks us to be even stronger in order to face up to the fundamentalist bodies in our societies. Whilst there is a school of the Latin Patriarchate open, respect and openness will be taught and so the schools enable us to cope to the reality of our society.

Here is my message to our Western Christian brothers:

Think about your Christian brothers here who are in need of you moral, spiritual and material support. Think about resolving the political problems of countries to make a better society.

Twinning our schools with Western schools in France, Germany, etc... gives our pupils openness to the world and is a way to meet values forgotten in our society such as love of your neighbour and not the rejection of him who is not like myself, or forgiveness, which is very difficult to be accepted. Do not forget that the children in our schools today, are the leaders of tomorrow's society.

Interview by François Vayne

(February 2, 2016)