The Hebrew speaking Catholics and migrants: the Patriarchate's pastoral outreach

The Saint James Vicariate and the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers are placed under the responsibility of Patriarchal Vicar Father Rafic Nahra. He outlines the history and the mission of these two Vicariates for our website.

Sixty-four years have passed since the foundation of the Association of Saint James, which later became the Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel. The first step towards the establishment of the Vicariate was the appointment of Msgr. Jean-Baptiste Gourion, in 1990, Patriarchal Vicar in charge of Hebrewspeaking Catholics (he was ordained bishop in 2003). After the death of Bishop Gourion in 2005, the post of Vicar passed to Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa (then Custos of the Holy Land) from 2005 to 2009, followed by Father David Neuhaus from 2009 to 2017.

It was in 2013, at the time of Father David, when the **Saint James Vicariate** received its official status from the Holy See, as proof of its particular identity and mission. From 2017, I personally hold the position of Vicar.

The Vicariate – which includes Hebrew-speaking and Russian-speaking Catholics – is an integral part of the Latin Patriarchate and is essentially active in large urban areas. **Hebrew-speaking parish communities** exist in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Beersheva, Haifa and Tiberias, considering that the faithful of surrounding towns and villages move to reach these communities.

With regards the **Russian-speaking communities**, the two leaders meet to pray regularly on a weekly basis in Latrun and Haifa; added to these are other small communities that meet sporadically.

Eleven priests – two of whom are currently retired – care for our communities. The families of the Vicariate are predominantly middle class.

One of their main challenges is the **transmission of faith**: children mostly attend the Israeli public school system (since there are no Hebrew-speaking Christian institutions) and – as a minority in a secularized world – risk losing their Christian identity. For this reason, the Vicariate invests heavily in the pastoral care of young people.

The Saint James Vicariate – given the context of life – is particularly sensitive to **relations with the Jewish world**, which are primarily neighbourhood relations. Some of our priests and faithful also engage in interreligious dialogue, which includes Jews and Muslims on various occasions.

The pastoral work of the Vicariate with migrants began in 2010 when Father David Neuhaus and his collaborators began teaching **catechism in Hebrew** to the Filipino children in southern Tel Aviv who attended the Israeli school and whose first language was Hebrew. Later, in 2014, we opened nursery schools for migrants and asylum seekers (from 3 months to 3 years old), knowing that their parents were forced to work all day long to earn a living.

We have also progressively developed our **pastoral care of young people,** to accompany them, instruct them and allow them to integrate into the local Church as well as into Israeli society. The development of activities for the benefit of migrants and their children led to the creation – within the Latin Patriarchate – of the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers, during Pentecost 2018.

Allow me to express my heartfelt thanks to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, which has helped the Saint James Vicariate down through the years, offering moral and material support for our mission. I thank the Knights and Dames for their constant attention and zeal in helping us in our the pastoral action of the Patriarchate in favour of migrants and their children, permitting them to lead a dignified existence, despite the precarious living conditions and the various risks that are posed.

Father Rafic Nahra

Patriarchal Vicar

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