Seminaries are an essential reality in the life of every diocese

Interview with the Rector of Beit Jala Seminary

Cardinal Filoni greets Latin Patriarchate seminarians and their teachers in May 2022.

The perception we always have from outside is that seminaries are an unchanging body with a perennial mandate. Father Bernard Poggi, rector of the Seminary of Beit Jala helped us to see how much tradition and innovation come together in the vital work of supporting future priests in the discernment of their path and preparing for their journey.

The New “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis – The Gift of the Priestly Vocation” greatly impacted how the Seminary of the Diocese of Jerusalem conceives itself and realigned its educational framework.

Father Poggi explains: “According to the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis (RFIS), which was Promulgated on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 2016), the manner in which we focus on how formation is given, has changed. It went from the focus on four main aspects: academic, spiritual, human and Seminaries are an essential reality in the life of every diocese pastoral to the application of formation in four stages: The Propaedeutic Stage, the Stage of Philosophical Studies (or Discipleship), the Stage of Theological Studies (or Configuration to Christ) and finally the Pastoral Stage (or Vocational Synthesis).”

The focus on integrated formation has shaped the way the Seminary is accompanying these young men in their path to priesthood. Certainly, each stage has a specific emphasis but the process is a whole. In this path the Order of the Holy Sepulchre silently supports the endeavour and action of this key institution of the Church of Jerusalem with a monthly contribution of about $ 60,000 and is very close to both seminarians and priest formators who are living their ministry there.

During the Propaedeutic Stage, Father Poggi tells us, “there is a human-spiritual emphasis; a time in search for the Lord: quaerere domini. In this, the year focuses heavily on vocational discernment, on self-knowledge and on how to live an authentic Catholic spirituality.” The Stage of Philosophical Studies “is constitutive to helping answer the most fundamental questions, such as those about existence, reason, knowledge, values, mind, and language. This period is also designed to help the student understand the scientific methodology of study and research in the field,” he continues. During the Stage of Theological Studies, “it becomes necessary for the seminarian to focus on how to become even more configured to the image of Christ, in persona Christi”. This time is offering a higher theological instruction and, Father Poggi, explains, “it is during this stage that we send our students for one year to attend St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, New York. In addition to the courses which they take while in the United States, the seminarians become aware of how the church works in other parts of the world. There, they are introduced to a very different pastoral reality.”

Finally, the Pastoral Stage is one of “vocational synthesis” and supports seminarians in concretely understanding what happens in the everyday life of a priest and “how to work with the parish priests in parish activities, setting and executing pastoral plans, engaging with young people, organizing Sunday masses and their associated ministries of liturgical chant, altar service, etc,” the rector of the seminary concludes.

Currently there are 20 seminarians in the major seminary (17 for the Latin Patriarchate and 3 for the Melkites from the Archdiocese of Akko) who are in various stages of their formation. The staff is composed by the Rector, Father Bernard Poggi, plus other four priest formators. This team also follows “23 seminarians who were in the minor seminary which has been closed since Corona Virus. They are now living with their respective families and are followed by the director of vocations, who visits them from time to time ensuring that things are going well for them,” Father Poggi shares.

Father Poggi (center, to the right of Cardinal Filoni) welcomed the Grand Master and the Order's leadership during their visit to Beit Jala Seminary.

Speaking in broader terms about the mission of the seminary, the Rectors says: “I like to use the analogy of life in the seminary to that of an engagement in preparation for marriage. We try to make the path as clear as possible and the goal is evident: these young men want to become priests.

Before they can do so there are several difficulties which they must overcome, it can be likened to a path along which you walk, along the way you find both roses and thorns. On our part we try to help the seminarian become aware of what God's will is in their lives and we try to the best of our abilities to give them the education and formation necessary for them to succeed in their mission."

In the Fall of 2022, the Beit Jala Seminary welcomed – as every year – a visit by the Patriarch, Archbishop Pizzaballa. It can be considered a canonical visit during which, Father Poggi shares, "the Patriarch lives with us as we live, there are largely no 'special programs'. He meets with everyone in the house, he actively listens to them and gives direction in a one-on-one basis. After doing so, he meets with the priest formators and gives them a kind of consensus of his visit. Together, we set a few goals or things which we have to work on in the coming year."

For the academic year 2022-2023, His Beatitude asked the team of formators to focus on two things which Father Poggi reports: "the first is the quality of formation which we offer. The second thing he asked us to do is to open the seminary to the laity. He wants the seminary to be a place of catechesis as well as a place of formation. In response to this goal, we focused on opening the seminary to the wider community in Palestine and Israel."

This way the beating heart of the Diocese in terms of formation of the local Church will not only be a place where seminarians grow in their life choices but also a place for the people of God to come and drink at the source of spiritual life. It is wonderful to know that, "in the past year, – as Father Poggi recounts with emotion – we have had well over 40 groups from the Catholic parishes in Israel and Palestine who have come to visit and spend some time in the seminary. We are able to offer them days of reflection, talks and some time to encounter the seminarians – and an opportunity just to get away from everyday life. In this way, the seminary becomes a place where the faithful can come and discover the richness of our faith and how to have a life that is rooted in Christ."

While we just celebrated the 150th anniversary of this institution, since Patriarch Giuseppe Valerga founded the Seminary in December 1852, we remember with gratitude his Catholic vision: to form local Arab Christians and young men coming from abroad to be diocesan priests for the Patriarchal Diocese of Jerusalem and we keep praying for that.

Elena Dini

(April 2023)

From the United States, a call to serve the Arab-Catholic community

A testimony of life from father Bernard Poggi

I was born in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1980. When I was 5 years old I had Leukemia; the experience has been very formative in my life. It was during the time of my illness that my maternal grandmother also had cancer (Multiple Myeloma). I saw in her that when you are sick there is kind of surrender to God, but at the same time a strength and vigor to overcome the illness. I underwent chemotherapy for 3 years at Stanford Children's Hospital. The illness really marked the end of my childhood; I couldn't run with my peers because my bones were fragile, I couldn't swim because I got sick very easily, etc.

It was in that experience that I realized I wanted to give my life to helping others. I was not too sure in which way, that is why after finishing Highschool I studied Physiology; I wanted to become a Medical Doctor. It was, and to a certain extent, still is a passion for me to help people feel better. While I was studying at San Francisco State University, I became the secretary to the parish priest of the ArabCatholics in Northern California. In seeing the work of that priest and his dedication to serving the community, I realized that much in the same way that a doctor helps to heal a person, so does a priest. I really saw that no matter how good medicine as a practice got, there is always going to be a need to help prepare people to meet God. As time progressed my role with the priest became less and less administrative and more and more spiritual/pastoral.

I graduated from college and finished 3 years of research in the field of endocrinology. Then I came to the Holy Land for the first time in 2007, to attend the wedding of a friend. During my visit here to the Holy Land, I realized how much the church did for society and I decided that I wanted to come to the Seminary here in Beit Jala, the place in which I now serve. I left the USA and entered the Seminary in 2010, I was ordained in 2014 and I was assigned to serve the Arab-Catholics in Northern California, replacing the priest with whom I had served for a long time.

During my time as parish priest in the San Francisco Bay Area, I did my graduate work at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkely in Systematic Theology. After attaining my STL, I was called back by the current Patriarch to serve in the Seminary, under the capable direction of Father Yacoub Rafidi with whom I served for 3 years. I am currently serving the Seminary in the role of rector, now for the second year. In being the rector of the seminary, I feel not only a sense of great responsibility but moreover a sense of gratitude. They always say that before the formator in the seminary begins to form others, he finishes his own formation. After being out of the seminary for four years, having

been a parish priest, the schedule and order which is instilled in the seminary kind of begins to leave your everyday practice. Coming back to this order has been a blessing in my priestly life. Beyond that helping to form the next generation of priests for the Holy Land is a great honor. I see in them a lot of promise, they want to make the church the best possible “place” to encounter the Lord and each other.

As priests of the Patriarchate, we are very close to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. From the first moment of Nulla Celebrior and the restoration of the Patriarchal See to Jerusalem as a residential Patriarch, Pope Pius IX re-organized the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. For us then, the link between the Patriarchate and the Knights is not one which is secondary, it is commonly part of our identity. There is complementarity between the work of the Order and the work of the Patriarchate.

Some ask why there should be an Order specifically to support the work of the Patriarchate, why not others? I think this goes back to the time of Saint Paul when he, having left Jerusalem physically, still remained attached to the mission of the “saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26). For him the project of the Church of Jerusalem, the mother of all Churches, was of great significance; he even went to the extent of risking the alienation of those churches that he had founded in order provide for Christianity in the Holy Land. The order for us represents the same “concern” of the Universal Church for the Mother Church. I have a fear that over time the significance of this “concern” will become diminished and I likewise have an awareness that responding to the initiative of the Order remains the thing which we as a local church must do better.

(April 2023)