



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

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

## The city where the Prince of Peace was born is longing for Peace today

Interview with Vera Baboun, the Mayor of Bethlehem



Vera Baboun and Msgr. Shomali, Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem, releasing doves as a sign of hope that peace may be reached in the Holy Land.

**A few days before the celebration of Christmas, we caught up with Vera Baboun, the first female Catholic Mayor of Bethlehem. In this interview, Baboun tells us how the city of Jesus' birth lives this time of year.**

***Mayor Baboun, what is the situation today in Bethlehem concerning the everyday life of your citizens and particularly of the Catholic communities?***

The Catholic community is part of the whole community. What happens in Bethlehem affects the Catholic population just as it affects everybody. This city is now segregated from Jerusalem, and the faithful of Bethlehem can hardly go to pray at the Holy Sepulchre: it is easier for people coming from Europe or America to go to the Holy Sepulchre than it is for a 21 year-old man from Bethlehem.

It is not a normal process and we are fighting abnormality; we are living an abnormality and trying to adjust to it. Our young people lose their lives and yet there is no solution at the horizon.

With the absence of peace, I face many complicated situations as a Mayor. Since 82% of the Governorate of Bethlehem is zone C, meaning that it is controlled by Israeli administration and security, it is an unbelievable challenge for me to practice my authority and serve the people.

In the Governorate we now have only 48,000 Christians out of 200,000 inhabitants. There is also a new wall in Cremisan which leads to the confiscation of the land of 58 Christian families. The olive wood and vineyards, which Bethlehem is known for, will be confiscated. All of this together: the wall,

the economic challenges and lack of opportunities, clearly affect the quality of life. When I talk about Bethlehem, the presence of Christians is very crucial, not only for us but for the whole Christian community around the world. We are here for you all.

***You are the first female Mayor in Bethlehem, what can you tell us about the role women play in Palestinian society and about the relationship between Muslim and Christian women at the service of peace in your land?***

Women are part of the Palestinian community and we face all challenges together with men. Being the first woman Mayor in the history of Bethlehem is an achievement but it is also a challenge.

I am trying to lead the city from the point of view of a woman. We are biologically created to give life and to first of all serve others. We have an immediate concern for others and we want to see life grow around us. In my case I have served as Mayor for the past three years and I never took a day of vacation... This is because I hear the challenges people face and I give all of myself.

Women in Palestine, whether Christian or Muslim, face the same challenges, the same restrictions and the same unemployment. Both Christians and Muslims are the mothers of the victims, the mothers of unemployed youth, the wives of unemployed men and of the victims. They are unemployed themselves, and are victims. Therefore, they suffer twice as much.

***Education is at the core of your professional career, since you are a professor. What role is education playing in supporting Bethlehem's youth? And what challenges do young people face?***

Young people – and in Bethlehem 50% of our population is less than 29 years old – are highly educated. Education for us is not only a right but a national duty. However, in Bethlehem we have the highest rate of unemployment of the West Bank (27%) and the highest rate of poverty (22%). People who remain in Bethlehem are educated but they end up working in fields other than the ones they have been trained for.

Unemployment is high despite the fact that Bethlehem is a touristic city, and whenever there are conflicts tourism is seriously affected. Here we have 33 hotels and many good quality restaurants. But without a solution and independence our everyday life and activities are affected as long as the conflict continues. So people tend to seek life outside of Bethlehem.

***What universal message did you read in Pope Francis' recent canonization of two Palestinian women, one of whom marked the history of Bethlehem?***

If there are walking saints on earth, Pope Francis is one of them. When he came to Bethlehem, when he listened to us, when we went to him, when we prayed together as Christians, Jews and Muslims, he acknowledged our rights as humans, as Palestinians and as Christians.

The canonization of the two Arab saints announced the holiness of a land that does not live in peace. By acknowledging its holiness, Pope Francis acknowledged the rights of people living in this land. In addition to the canonization he gave recognition to the State of Palestine. He raised the flag of Palestine in the Vatican, and he reminded the world, including us, that ours is the Holy Land and the origin of holiness.

***After the formal ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement you mentioned between the State of Palestine and the Holy See, what are the next steps that need to be taken?***

This decision of His Holiness has to be considered by the United Nations. The State of Israel has been recognized by the United Nations and the international community and we, as Palestinians, recognized it. It is unbelievable and completely unfair that the State of Palestine until today is not fully recognized by the United Nations and the international community, the same who recognized the State of Israel. This is the most crucial fact. That is the most important thing.

We are doing everything to live in peace, but I think that now is the time for the world to take its own responsibility. That is also why we call for international intervention in Palestine to stop what is going on. What brings peace is recognition, and then peace brings security, not the other way around.

***Christmas is approaching. How do you live this special time of year?***

Now that Christmas is approaching, here in Bethlehem we are thinking about the meaning of the nature of this celebration in the midst of killing that are taking place in Palestine due to the recent upheavals. We decided that the Christmas market and lightening of the tree will take place. It will be a national celebration in which we can share Bethlehem's message with the whole world.

Our motto this year for the Christmas celebration will be "in the land of Palestine there is what deserves peace". The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish said: "in this land there is what deserves life". Our life, in its beauty and holiness, deserves to remain here and to go on, to feel the joy and face the challenges we go through. We took this sentence and we substituted the word "life" with "peace" and we applied that message to Bethlehem.

It seems that nobody realizes that Bethlehem, the city which gave the message of peace to the whole world on Christmas, continues to give the message of peace to the whole world today, despite the fact that it does not live peace. The stones – the land – and the living stones – the people – deserve peace.

On December 5, I stand to give the message of Bethlehem to the whole world when we light the Christmas tree. Every time I wish that I might say: 'Thank you God, thank you humanity for bringing peace to Palestine and Bethlehem'. I wish I could say that. But every time I go there and I say: 'Let us pray that we can have peace', since peace has not yet been achieved.

***For you, as Mayor of Bethlehem, what does the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, a Pontifical institution which materially supports the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, concretely represent? What do you expect from its members and what could they do concerning the current situation in your country?***

The Order of the Holy Sepulchre has a direct and institutionalized relationship with the Latin Patriarchate. As Mayor and as citizens, therefore, we do not have direct contact with you but we know that you support schools and many other aspects that empowers the Catholic faithful in the Holy Land. I was a professor at Bethlehem University, and then the principal of a Greek-Catholic school for one year and a half, and so I know that a good percentage of the fees of the students are covered by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and other institutions. This support comes through the Patriarchate and therefore we do not know the details. However, I know that members of the Order are highly

connected to the Holy Land, I see them frequently in Bethlehem and I fully appreciate all that you do. Keeping hope and helping people to remain here is something crucial and this is what you are doing.

***Is there a final message you would like to share?***

Life is about voices and to create a change you need a courageous and faithful voice that speaks the truth. I know that, as Christians, our Lord Jesus taught us that if we are not able to express the truth, it is better to remain silent. Since we are all facing the reality of Bethlehem, and we see what is going on here in Palestine, I ask that the true voices express the truth without fear: Bethlehem, the city of peace, is not living in peace, and this is a great disgrace.

**Interview by Elena Dini**

*(December 21, 2015)*