



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"Giving a voice to Christians in the Holy Land"

Interview with Msgr. Michel Dubost, Bishop of Evry Corbeil-Essonnes, member of the Bishops of the Holy Land Coordination, President of the Council for Interreligious Relations of the French Bishops' Conference and member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.



Msgr. Michel Dubost visiting the Our Lady of Peace Centre in Amman. Picture: Mazur

Msgr. Michel Dubost, you recently visited Gaza, Bethlehem, the Cremisan Valley and Jordan on behalf of the "Holy Land Coordination". How and why was this Coordination established?

The Bishops of the Holy Land Coordination was established by the Holy See and brings bishops together who, representing the bishops' conferences, have the Holy Land at heart for historical and pastoral reasons. Over time, this coordination has been enriched by people who know the Holy Land well and who represent large organizations, such as the members of the Holy Sepulchre. We are also accompanied by some journalists. We must pay respect to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, which is the real driving force behind our work. We usually use four "P's" to describe our mission: "P" for a presence for Christians in the Holy Land; "P" for praying with and for them; "P" for pilgrimage, as we believe that the work of Christians in the Holy Land depends largely on pilgrimages and that the future of pilgrimages depends largely on these living stones which are the local Christians; "P" for pleading: we assume, therefore, the mission of defending the cause of these Christians publicly and with those who govern.

Let us first speak about Gaza. What did you observe there? Is it true that "Christians are subjected to many pressures", as was seen in a newspaper headline?

In Gaza, Christians make up only a handful of people in a society that has been living through a drama for many years. It is understandable that the majority, and those who govern, are tempted to forget this minority, and to even not consider it at all, in order to move towards that which seems to be important at present. This is the situation that we are in. The pressure is compounded by the strong

Islamist nature of Hamas, but it is also tempered by the role of the Christian community, which, though small, renders a huge service to formation and help, for example towards people with disabilities.

You also went to Bethlehem. Is this city a place of peace today? What evidence did you see on this topic, in particular when speaking with Vera Baboun, the Mayor of Bethlehem? Did you meet the families of the Cremisan Valley whose lands were confiscated? What can be said of their situation? Do you see a solution?

This year I did not meet Mayor Vera Baboun. She is a remarkable woman. We cannot say, however, that Bethlehem is at peace. Every year its territory decreases. Its access to water decreases. The freedom of movement for its inhabitants decreases. Its territory decreases, for example, with the construction of the "Cremisan Wall". The purpose of this wall is not to increase security in general, but to protect the settlers who are illegally occupying, in the eyes of international law, this part of the territory. Let's be clear: many of these settlers have no idea of what they are making the other people suffer, other human beings like them. Upon reaching the wall, signals indicate that Jewish citizens are forbidden to go to the other side... that there is the danger of death. How could you not believe that? In fact, I would be tempted to speak at length about the Cremisan farmers, but I wouldn't know how to go about it: to describe their look, how they are people attached to their ancient olive trees. They have conducted the fight in a non-violent way, and everything indicates that they have lost. Only a miraculous awakening of international public opinion could possibly change anything. But the way in which their bishops, about ten, were treated by the Israeli police tells people: "We have the strength and nothing will prevent us from doing what we want to do."

How has the diplomatic agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine, which came into force on January 2, been perceived in the Holy Land? What have you been told on this matter? Can one hope, in the near future, in an agreement of this kind with the State of Israel?

We have certainly spoken about the agreements between the Holy See and the State of Palestine. Paradoxically, we have not talked about the Fundamental Agreement that is in discussion between the Holy See and Israel, even though it was a recurring theme for more than ten years. I am not a politician. It seems to me that the path Israel has followed is marked on the one hand by the legitimate will to be a master of their own home, and on the other hand by the temptation to exclude those who are not Jewish. This year anti-Christian deeds were perpetrated. For several years some ministers have suggested that it would be better if the Arabs leave, helping the idea to spread throughout the country that, after all, it would be better if each were in their own home, be it religious or ethnic. This temptation is certainly not felt by the majority, but by some Muslims elsewhere, and it may be shared by some Jews. We must remember that the Holy Land was a Christian land for a long time, and that it is also historically legitimate for Christians to remain there. It is easy to blame and to suspect, but it should be necessary above all to reflect theologically on the relationship between our faith and the land. Jews, Muslims and Christians ought to have every reason to clearly express what they think and to place themselves realistically in the world as it is.

The Holy Land Coordination has traveled to Jordan to meet Syrian and Iraqi refugees, particularly those who are Christians. What did you see there and what can one do for them from a distance?

People are very concerned for Syrians today. It is understandable and this must be supported. It seems necessary, however, not to forget the Iraqi people. So far, the Iraqis are the only ones who, with the Yazidis, were driven out because of their faith or religion. Taking their religion into account

does not mean leaving French or UN secularism since this is the cause of their political persecution. While there, I admired the Jordanian Church and the entire kingdom. A fragile Church, a kingdom without water and energy accommodating a population of nearly three million refugees – including Palestinians and Yemenis also – which brings the total population of Jordan to nine million. One in every three people is a foreigner! We must say it, make it known and refuse to lock ourselves in the selfishness that discredits us.

While the interests of some groups seek to drag Western Christians into a conflict of Islamophobia, in which they do not belong, which initiatives propose to resist bearers of manipulation, hatred and violence?

Our world is afraid. Fear creates protectionism and locks people in their territories. It is necessary to go incessantly to meet the other, without fear. But for this you must be confident in yourself and, I would say, above all, in God. What strikes me is the difficulty some Christians have in understanding that Christ is victorious, that forgiveness is victorious, that mercy is victorious. It is true that mercy involves risk, but selfishness leads to spiritual death, which ought to be feared more than physical death! We do not agree with Muslims on many points, and it is good to be able to say it fraternally, but God also speaks to us through them. They are creatures of the Word and we must listen to them. Perhaps the Virgin Mary, in her silence, offers us a path, she who did not understand everything but pondered things in her heart.

Interview by François Vayne

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