Open doors at the Beit Jala Seminary

Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa with the seminarians of his diocese and their formators in the seminary of Beit Jala, in Palestine.

Father Yacoub Rafidi – Rector of the seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, actively supported by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre – spoke with the Grand Magisterium Communications Office to present the formation institute for future priests. "The members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre have been part of our family since the founding of the seminary. Every day we pray for them in a particular prayer that we recite for benefactors and friends of the seminary around the world", writes the religious. This seminary – source of priestly formation for the Holy Land – is located in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, in the State of Palestine.

Every year, our seminary life is one of love, joy and devotion thanks to the spiritual help and financial support of our friends, the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre around the world. The Beit Jala Seminary is the heart of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the place where the seed of vocation takes root and flourishes.

The first historical institute of higher education continues today, by the grace of God, to form educated priests ready to face the 21st century. Despite the deplorable political situation, wars and poverty in the region, the seminary remains a beacon for the future of Christianity in the country of our Redemption.

Since its creation in 1852, it has so far formed 288 priests, 14 bishops, 3 patriarchs and continues to work for the development of the Mother Church of Jerusalem. Our family includes about 100 people, including 32 minor seminarians, 18 major seminarians, 7 priests and 3 nuns. Lay personnel (about

forty people) also participate in the life of the seminary, helping us in the teaching and management of the institute. The student begins this journey at the minor seminary at the age of 13-14.

An ordinary school offers all the subjects required by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. We also offer lessons in French and English. Minor seminarians are accompanied humanely and spiritually to discover their vocation. A group of teachers and priests follows the academic life as well as the development of the student. The daily life of the minor seminary includes numerous programs that help this personal development, so that the child becomes a Christian aware of his vocation. At the end of these studies, at the age of 18-19, if he wishes he can enter the major seminary to undertake higher studies.

We have about 20 seminarians. Half come from the minor seminary. The study program lasts nine years: a preparatory year, the two-year philosophy course, one year at the 'Saint Joseph' seminary in New York, three years of theology, a pastoral year and a final year for diaconal and priestly ordination. The faculty of philosophy and theology is affiliated to the Pontifical Lateran University of Rome since May 3, 1967. The lessons are taught in Arabic, but also French, English and sometimes Italian. Our mission is to provide students – future priests – with the opportunity to receive a solid intellectual, human, spiritual and pastoral formation, starting from tradition and based on the vision of today's universal Church.

At the same time, we try to take into consideration the challenges, characteristics and local needs of the diocese of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It is a minority Church that lives with two "majorities": Jews and Muslims. The challenges are many: the discernment of vocation; the spiritual accompaniment of the seminarian; the political situation, of the local Church and of the universal Church; the formation of priests of the Land of Jesus.

In the face of these challenges, three points are explored in the seminary, namely prayer, study and transparency. These three criteria are fundamental and indispensable for priestly discernment, as well as for having – according to the vision of the Church and especially of Pope Francis – a clergy serving the people, far from clericalism, power and money: "Every high priest, caught between men, is constituted for the good of men in things that concern God "(Hebrews 5:1). It is also important to be good shepherds who take care of their flock, without thinking of themselves: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? "(Ezekiel 34:2).

The Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre have been part of our family since the founding of the seminary. We pray every day for them in a particular prayer that we recite for benefactors and friends of the seminary across the world. We are perfectly aware that thanks to the affection and support of the members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre we can carry out our mission and would like to take advantage of this article on the seminary life to express our deep gratitude and sincere friendship, on behalf of the seminary family.

Father Yacoub Rafidi

(Summer 2019)

“My name is **Fadi Qandah**, I am 25 and I am a seminarian in my preparatory year. I started thinking about being a priest in the third year of secondary school.

I asked myself these two questions: why do I not become a priest and do I have what is necessary to become a priest? Therefore, I asked a priest about it and he advised me first to finish my studies.

I did it, but waiting, I became aware that nothing in this world is worth living, if not for Jesus.

When I completed my studies, I decided to come to the seminary and test my vocation, finding an answer to the questions I had”.

“I am **Jiries Sayej**, a Palestinian from Ramallah; I am 24 years old and have been studying theology for two years. I entered the seminary in 2009.

From a very young age, I loved helping people and above all, I always wanted to attend Mass and the liturgy: this led me to come to the seminary.

At the beginning, I read the lives of the saints and appreciated the story of St. Francis of Assisi and his spirituality, like that of St. Therese of Lisieux. I greatly admired the simplicity of their holiness and decided to take them as an example and guide in my journey.

Day after day, my vocation grows and I love it. I am very happy to be able to serve the good Lord".

"My name is **Nadeem Giacaman**; I am in the third year of theology at the seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Before entering, I studied administration at Bethlehem University and heard my call there.

It is my sixth year in the seminary: my life here follows a rich and necessary path, which helps me to positively develop many aspects of my personality, thanks to both my studies and the pastoral experience I obtain.

During these years, God has allowed me to understand how He leads me in all circumstances to Him and to the priesthood. The most important thing is that I am happy with God's call to serve others".