Father Pizzaballa: Starting anew from the Risen Christ

Meeting between Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Father Francesco Patton upon entering, the latter vested as the new Custos of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem in June 2016. Photo by Thomas Charrière, Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

The following is an interview with the new Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who was appointed by Pope Francis to assume this position on the feast of St. John the Baptist and raised to the dignity of Archbishop. Father Pizzaballa will receive his episcopal consecration on September 10 in the Cathedral of Bergamo, his diocese of origin.

Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, in your opinion, what are the various current challenges of the Christian presence in the biblical lands, from a pastoral point of view, especially in those territories entrusted to the Latin Patriarchate?

As you know, the Patriarchate extends from Jordan to Cyprus, passing through the Holy Land (Israel and Palestine), with the heart of Jerusalem. It is a vast territory and quite diverse, where politically, socially and pastorally speaking the issues are completely different.

In Jordan, the political environment is stable. Compared to the tragedies in the countries that surround it, especially in Syria and Iraq, it is a calm and serene oasis. But even here, as is the case everywhere, there are plenty of problems: the economy remains fragile and there is a serious problem of unemployment among the youth. The vast number of refugees, who are mainly Syrian, is creating a serious unease from a social point of view. It must be noted that the efforts of the whole country to help those who are desperate are admirable, but it remains objectively difficult to offer opportunities to hundreds of thousands of people who arrived so suddenly, above all, as we said, in an economical context that is already fragile.

In the Holy Land the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political reality that is known to all and honestly I would not know what to add in this regard. We hope that the political earthquake that has shocked the Middle Eastern ports will also cause the rulers of Palestine and Israel to meet again in order to give a perspective to their respective peoples that is not only to accuse one another. It seems that they are redefining a new equilibrium between the various Middle Eastern countries. In the Holy Land it is also time for a new language that offers prospects and a future. The alternative to this is only war.

In Cyprus too it seems that discussions between the two sides have become easier. We hope that this is the case not just in appearances.

In this context of great change, our pastoral activity also changes. The changes, in fact, not only concern the macro-political, but also (and I would say especially) the societies of the respective countries. The role of the family, the youth field and the world of work are rapidly changing in the Middle East. Interreligious dialogue, in a context of a growing fundamentalism, poses new and difficult questions. The relationship between the Christian churches is faced with common needs of coordination not only on a pastoral level.

The questions are many, therefore, and we will try to understand and to work together as a Church to find the possible answers.

You know the Holy Land perfectly well, as you have already served the Gospel there for a quarter of a century. The situation of extreme tension that prevails in Palestine seems particularly, to our human eyes, to have no way out. What is the secret of your hope and what do you intend to do in order to participate in the search for solutions that promote peace?

Our hope, the hope of every Christian, is the risen Christ. We have to start from there. The Church does not believe that it can change or affect big politics. The great things of this world do not succeed, let alone what we can do. We can certainly try to bring our voices and make them known, but remaining well aware of our limitations.

What we need and want to do is to never lose hope and trust, and remain stubbornly passionate and in love with this Land and these peoples. In this context we want to bear witness with our lifestyle of a way of living inside this conflict. Above all, we want to be in peace and to not allow the language of hate and violence to prevail among us. We do not want to stop believing in the goodness of people. In short, we want to be a place of encounter that goes beyond all walls and all barriers. And this force is only born and understood through an encounter with Christ. Otherwise it is and remains only one of many spiritual abstractions.

In what way do you, a son of Saint Francis who chose to marry Sister Poverty, think that the Order of the Holy Sepulchre can raise better awareness of its profound vocation, which is sometimes hidden behind ceremonial appearances, and is there a spiritual message you would like to share with the 30,000 Knights and Dames who are committed in their dioceses to serving the “living stones” of the Holy Land?

The Holy Land is a testimony of the history of salvation. For this reason it is holy. A Knight must therefore be the bearer, the herald of that experience of salvation that he has experienced. Before his conversion, Saint Francis wanted to become a knight and in this way to win a heraldic title. After his conversion he would become the herald of the great King, Jesus.

A Knight of the Holy Sepulchre who serves the living stones, that is the Christian communities of the Holy Land, wants to joyfully and concretely show the beauty of having encountered Jesus and of still being able to “touch” him, to experience him through the Mother Church of Jerusalem.

Interview by François Vayne

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