



Reflections from the Holy Land Jerusalem, Amman, Gaza, and the Work of the Church

As winter was winding down and spring was inching along, the major concern on the ground was what kind of a summer will we have considering a number of factors in the making all around us. This included the move of the US Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem; the US pullout from the Iran agreement and what potential impact it will have on the border with neighboring Syria; anniversaries such as 51 years of the six-day war as well as 70 years of the Nakba for the Palestinians and declaration of independence of the Israelis; not to mention eleven years of the siege of Gaza. There was (and continues to be) a lot of stress and tension around these events that once all these dates materialize, we will be on disastrous track that will create major disturbances, a possible domino effect we all know how it starts, but no one will know how or when it will end. Indeed, the situation did deteriorate starting on the Syria-Israel border and the escalation of the situation there, leading to the Jerusalem Embassy move that resulted in over 60 Palestinians killed on the same day and over a thousand injured on the Gaza border and leading to the more recent rocket exchanges on the Gaza border over the past few days. So, what exactly is new? We have been through it all before including wars, sieges, intifadas, and we survived. Will we be able to do it again? Time will certainly tell, but the odds are high that we will!

Despite this depressing, but realistic introduction, it has been great to be part of exciting times for the work of the Church in the Holy Land. For me personally, I retain my sanity through field visits and being in contact with parish priests, school principals, and center directors. I will highlight three recent examples that not only show how the Church and its institutions survive, but how they actually thrive when the situation gets tough.

Visit with Iraqi Refugees in Amman

A few weeks ago, during a visit to Jordan, I was privileged to meet with about ten Iraqi refugees at Our Lady of Peace Center in Jordan who are benefitting from our humanitarian assistance program. Though they all shared their heartbreaking stories with us about the circumstances under which they left their homes in Iraq, it was heartwarming to hear what the assistance of the Church has done to their lives providing them with a dignified life and providing hope. Not only is their faith being strengthened through their close collaboration, but they are getting financial support towards their rental expenses, school fees for their children, and medical assistance when needed. Most of them continue to dream of eventually getting a visa to one of the western countries in order to start a new life there (all of them do not wish to return to Iraq given what they have been through). In the meantime, their only source of spiritual and financial support is the Church and its institutions!



Visit to Beit Afram Elderly Home

Again, I was privileged to visit the elderly center in Taybeh on a number of occasions in recent months. There you experience the true partnership between the local staff and the volunteers from the Comunidade Filhos De Maria from Brazil who live in Taybeh and dedicate their life to be of service to marginalized communities around the world. Together, they provide a quality service for the 25 or so elderly people who are in residence there. With emigration of Christian families on the rise, and with the socio-economic status of our Christian families on the decline, these elderly are left with no one to care for them and offer them a dignified life. The spirit of the elderly in residence is indeed something we are all proud of. They feel at home, members of an extended family in a caring and loving environment. Again, a visit to this home is an uplifting experience and a source of pride about the work of the Church in the service of marginalized members of our society.



Gaza Summer Camps

A few days ago, and after very difficult weeks of confrontations on the Gaza borders which left over 120 Palestinian youth killed and thousands injured, many leading to permanent disabilities, rockets started flying out of Gaza and air raid and tank shells were directed at Gaza. The situation was on the brink of a complete escalation. Keeping in mind the already desperate situation of Gaza with 4 hours of electricity per day, no clean drinking water, total breakdown of the sewage network, not to mention a 45% unemployment rate (over 65% among the youth and women), I proceeded to call Fr. Mario da Silva, the parish priest there to check up on him. Though he confirmed that the situation in Gaza is the worst he has ever seen, he assured me that life goes on in Gaza and their youth summer camp is already in progress. That same night, I received a call from Sr. Nabila Saleh, the director of the Rosary Sisters School in Gaza asking that we forward the coordinates of the Catholic institutions in Gaza to the Israeli authorities (as was the case during the last war in July 2014), so that if large scale shelling starts, maybe our institutions can be spared!!! It was not easy for me going to bed with the prospects of a full-scale war looming 90 kilometers away from home, and what impact it may have on Gaza. I woke up the following morning and found a WhatsApp message from Fr. Mario including a few photos of the children enjoying the summer camp activities at the Holy Family parish complex. Needless to say, that made me very proud of our presence and our work with the children who have to endure life in a war zone and still find a way to be hopeful and thankful. These children deserve our full respect and support! Indeed, life goes on in Gaza, and the work of the Church is what makes that a more “human” experience. Our hats are off to Fr. Mario, Sr. Nabila and many others for keeping that hope alive!



I wanted to share some of these daily experiences before summer vacations start as a way to say thank you from all of us at the Latin Patriarchate for your moral and financial support. We could not do what we do and be able to bring hope to these diversified communities without your support.

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Children of the Gaza parish, gathering for a picture during the Summer Camp