



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"Work everywhere for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza! We must do everything possible to ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not spread to the whole region"

Interview with Father Gabriel Romanelli, parish priest of Gaza



"Work everywhere for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza! We must do everything possible to ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not spread to the whole region". The appeal is from Father Gabriel Romanelli, parish priest of Gaza, shared with the author of this article as he entrusts to the Child God who came to save us, the tears and pain of so many families devastated by the military retaliation ordered by Netanyahu after the cruel attack by Hamas on 7 October. We listened to his moving testimony as we walked with him among the places of Jesus and Mary.

How do you feel being away from Gaza while your parish community suffers from the war?

I asked myself why, when I was supposed to return to Gaza on October 6, a delay left me in Bethlehem on October 7, the day of the Hamas attacks on Israel, without being able to return to my parish. I was returning from the Rome and the ceremonies for the cardinalate of the Patriarch of Jerusalem (Monsignor Pizzaballa, ed.) and I was waiting in Bethlehem to collect some medicines that had arrived from Argentina for a nun who serves in Gaza. The medicines were supposed to arrive on the 6th and I was supposed to return to Gaza the same day, but the delivery of the package from Nazareth was delayed. I was therefore supposed to go to Gaza on the 8th, the day after Saturday - because the border is closed during this weekly Jewish holiday - when, on the morning of the 7th, we learned of the tragedy. During the acts of terror, 1,200 people were murdered in appalling conditions. These are heinous crimes that we immediately condemned! Then I thought that perhaps it was providential that I was not on site in Gaza to be able to better help the Christian community of my parish, because I am working alongside Cardinal Pizzaballa at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem to help him in this situation, in direct contact with the Pope who calls me almost every day. He speaks to me in

Spanish, because I am Argentine like him. He also calls the Gaza community when it is technically possible, and this is an extraordinary support for all of us! Naturally, I keep in touch with my vicar, Father Youssef Asaad, even if communications are very difficult".

How many people have died in Gaza's Christian community?

There are 2.3 million people living in the Gaza Strip, the vast majority of them Muslims. At the beginning of the war, there were a thousand Christians, 1017 to be exact, including a hundred Catholics, exactly 135. We had three Catholic schools, which were also damaged. Currently, 600 people have sought refuge in our parish church of the Holy Family, including many children, about 60 of them accompanied by Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity. Israeli shelling and snipers have killed 20 Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and seven others have died due to lack of medical assistance. To date we have lost 27 faithful, almost 3% of Gaza's Christian community. The wounded and the sick are condemned to death, as it is almost impossible to treat them for lack of medical resources'.

What do your parishioners do during the day?

"We had set up a workshop to produce hosts so that we could celebrate the Eucharist every day during the pandemic, when supplies were difficult. Our idea was also to provide visitors with hosts to use at Masses on their return, to create a stronger spiritual bond with the rest of the world. The workshop is now up and running and parishioners work there, providing wafers for our two daily Masses. The Catholics pray a lot during the day, taking turns praying the Rosary in groups and participating in the morning and afternoon Eucharistic celebrations".

What message would you like to address to Christians around the world?

«My first message is: work everywhere for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, because there have already been too many deaths, more than 22 thousand victims of the bombs, including 8 thousand children! Let's not get used to this carnage. More than 56 thousand wounded are awaiting treatment... We must do everything possible to prevent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from spreading to the entire region. The second message is an invitation to come on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, because the holy places are open and there is objectively no danger. The resumption of pilgrimages will allow the population to no longer feel abandoned and to rediscover the hope they are currently lacking. According to statistics, Christians in the Holy Land are still 2%: we support the presence of these "living stones" where Christ lived, died and gave his life for us! The entire Palestinian population awaits the pilgrims, who with their prayers express the closeness of the entire world to the cause of justice and peace."

You have been in the Holy Land for a long time. Based on your experience on the ground, what do you think of the current situation of lack of communication between Jews and Muslims after October 7th?

«I am 54 years old and have been in the Holy Land for 28. I entered the Congregation of the Incarnate Word in Argentina at the age of 18 and was destined to serve in Palestine, where our religious family is very committed to the poorest of the poor. My experience is that in Palestine, not only Muslims, but also Christians have felt a sense of injustice since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1948. Many have lost everything, have been driven from their land, live in camps and United Nations resolutions in their favor are not enforced. Extremism and terrorism have developed on the basis of this injustice. A ceasefire is now the only emergency, because every minute of war produces more hatred, more desire for revenge and no one can win this way in the long run. In Gaza there is nothing left, civilians have no homes, no jobs... The Pope is right when he says that violence and terror offer no solutions, but who wants to listen to him? It is very difficult to qualify the positions at this time, but what future is offered to the 6.8 million Palestinians who today live on the territory of the former British Mandate of Palestine (1923-1948), now the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories of the Strip of Gaza and the West Bank? This atrocious war - 1,200 dead on one side, 22,000 on the other as we speak - will perhaps be an opportunity to understand that "the work of justice will be peace", in the words of the prophet Isaiah."

Cardinal Fernando Filoni recently made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land on behalf of the 30 thousand members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, of which he is Grand Master. You accompanied him for a week. What did this visit mean for you?

"This pilgrimage of a small delegation of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, led by the Grand Master, brought profound joy to all Catholics in the Holy Land, at a time when we felt very alone and defenseless. The Christian presence in the Holy Land is threatened by supremacists and extremists, two faces of the same religious intolerance. The Order's support for the Catholic schools and parishes of the Latin Patriarchate and for the most disadvantaged families of our Church is an expression of the noble heart of the Knights and Ladies, the nobility of Jesus Christ. They save the Christian presence in the holy places and thus testify to the whole world that Jesus is alive!

Since the Resurrection, death will never have the last word! The Palestinian people are going through an ordeal right now, but united with Jesus through my parishioners who pray and offer their suffering to God, they are promised a new life. The Holy Land will never be the same after this war, and we will have to think about aid programs to create jobs and encourage local self-sufficiency. I believe that peace in the world depends on peace in the Holy Land, and to this end the personal conversion of every Christian is important. There will be no peace if every Christian does not personally seek to experience essential peace, with God and with others, through the sacraments of the Church. We have to start within ourselves and around us. A good sacramental confession is the first step towards world peace. And, as Saint John Paul II said, peace will be the last word in history."

Interview by François Vayne, Jerusalem, January 3, 2024