Facing the challenges together as one big family

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem responds to the health and economic emergency of Covid-19

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We have all been hoping that after weeks of severe restrictions in an attempt to control the epidemic between March and May, the cautious reopening in these last weeks could have signalled the start of a new phase in the Holy Land. At the beginning of July, CEO of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem Sami El-Yousef commented: “The general health situation seemed to be under control until about two weeks ago when there was a major increase in cases both in Israel and Palestine, while the situation is relatively controlled in Jordan. In what is almost a complete reversal, nearly all easing of the restrictions has been cancelled, leading to localised lockdowns in areas where the spread is greatest.” Each country is reacting in a different manner, especially in light of the diverse ways in which the virus spreads.

The surge in unemployment rates suggests a worrisome future, and we ask ourselves with regard to the field of education how the scholastic activities might proceed in the reopening of the academic year, to which there are still no clear answers. For now, the usual summer activities for the youth have been suspended in their customary format and activities with reduced numbers have been chosen following guidance from the respective ministries for health on the regulations of hygiene and social distancing.

Sami El-Yousef related in detail the various measures put into action across the whole Latin Patriarchate with the aim of fostering reciprocal support among its employees and entities, in order to help reduce spending whilst at the same time providing all employees with the possibility of continuing their work, ensuring a salary at such a difficult time.

The first challenge that the Latin Patriarchate had to respond to was the absence of scholastic enrolment fees. Indeed, many parents found themselves unable to pay the rates, leading to a deficit

which thereby warranted the creation of an emergency committee that worked on a payment plan, in order to maximise revenue and reduce spending. In light of these conditions, Grand Master of the Order Cardinal Fernando Filoni decided to launch an appeal to the Knights and Dames during the month of May, for a special humanitarian relief tied to the Covid-19 emergency. The members of the Order replied generously, well aware of the great suffering endured by many families throughout the Holy Land at this time. The funds received will be used in two tranches: the first to support those households needing help to buy basic goods (food, medicine, etc.) and to pay for essential utility bills. So far more than 800 families have benefited from this help. The second tranche will be destined to those who have lost their jobs during this time and are unable to pay the tuition fees for their children who study in the Patriarchate schools.

Alongside this initiative implemented by the Order and in a call to solidarity, the Latin Patriarchate has contacted various dioceses and Catholic organisations around the world. But some measures were also taken at a very local level in the spirit of being one big family. In April the teachers in Palestine received a portion of their salary and in May so did the teachers of the Patriarchate schools in Jordan. The rest of their income will be given to them as soon as liquidity becomes available. In order to sustain these staff who are now facing greater difficulties, the rest of the staff, institutions and entities linked to the Latin Patriarchate have mobilised. Sami El-Yousef explains: “an appeal was launched with the priests, whereby the vast majority of them donated a portion (or in some cases all) of their monthly living subsidy towards the school fund.” He continues, “during the month of June all administrative staff of the LPJ amounting to around 150 employees donated 20% of their salary towards the school fund.” Finally he adds, “during the month of July and given summer vacations, the staff of the following entities will donate 20% of their salaries including Beit Jala Seminary; Christ the King Bookstore; and Our Lady of Peace Centre”.

Despite the difficult period, the Latin Patriarchate activities do not come to a halt and Archbishop Pizzaballa recently authorized to proceed with scheduled works for the four big projects agreed with the Grand Magisterium in January 2020.

On behalf of the Patriarchate, the administrative director concludes by thanking the Order of the Holy Sepulchre for everything it has done during this time: “The incredible demonstration of concern, prayers and financial support for your brothers and sisters has been a great breath of fresh air amidst all the negativity and difficulties that have swept through the world since the pandemic started. We are truly blessed to have the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem behind us. A big thank you to the Grand Master His Eminence Cardinal Filoni; the Governor General His Excellency Leonardo Visconti; the Members of the Grand Magisterium; Members of the Holy Land Commission; Lieutenants and all members for their generosity.”

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