

Reflections from the Holy Land

Two years ago, on 11 March 2020, the world went into crisis mode as the World Health Organization officially declared Covid-19 a pandemic. The unknown that came along with that declaration including lockdowns and travel restrictions brought the world to a stop! It is only



now that life is returning to some normalcy, and it is very refreshing to see pilgrims again on the streets of Jerusalem. It was also very refreshing to see that the current school year which is about to conclude was conducted mostly in class rather than through the very difficult virtual experience of the previous year. Thus, there is much to be thankful for during this Lent season, leading to holy week and the Easter celebrations. In a beautiful way, this month is not only a time of celebration for the Christian faith, but also for our Moslem brothers and sisters who observe the holy month of Ramadan, as well as our Jewish brothers and sisters who observe the Passover celebrations. Thus, Jerusalem will undoubtedly be very busy in the coming weeks as each faith

celebrates according to their own traditions, in their designated spaces and hopefully the celebrations will be observed in peace and with dignity.

Last week coincided with a three-day visit to Gaza to follow up on our work there and be in solidarity with our small, yet very active community there. Our star project in Gaza being the job creation continues to provide a wonderful experience and a dignified income to over 65 people there. Also, the implementation of the much-delayed capital development projects is almost done expanding and improving facilities at different locations there. The issuance of over 700 permits to members of the Christian community for a period close to three months was cause for great celebration for a community that feels like they live in a big prison. Hopefully, the situation across the borders will remain calm so that our brothers and sisters from Gaza will enjoy being in Jerusalem during the upcoming Easter festivities.



The Palestine Schools Directorate recently organized a three-day capacity building conference to all teachers and staff there. The feeling of commitment, loyalty, and dedication sensed during



the conference is a great sense of comfort that our students are in safe hands. Not only were we able to implement many capital development and equipment / furniture upgrades at a number of schools during the year, but the passion of the teachers to improve their skills and be engaged in various capacity building schemes was just breathtaking.

Our churches and pastoral centers also came back to life with activities organized at every level whether the youth chaplaincy, Sunday school programs, catechetical programs, scout activities, spiritual retreats, and visits to holy sites. Even the

Vicariate for the Migrants and Asylum Seekers reported tens of baptisms, first communions, and weddings, highlighting how connected to the Church they continue to be despite the harsh conditions they face and at times being forced to live on the margins.

There was certainly great overload on the various humanitarian programs given the pandemic and related economic difficulties. However, the generosity of our donors meant that we



received 50% more funds than promised and budgeted which allowed us to reach 4,465 beneficiaries over the period of the last 12 months. This is not counting the over 20,000 beneficiaries from the Covid-19 appeal funds that will come to a conclusion soon. One of the great developments in recent months has been launching the AFAQ project in partnership with Bethlehem University aiming to provide empowerment and long-term sustainable solutions to people who found themselves chronically unemployed due to the

pandemic or for other reasons. The demand on the various capacity building opportunities surpassed all our expectations.

On the boring administrative and financial restructuring side, our last set of audited financial statements demonstrate that not only did we dramatically bring our deficit and long-term debts down, but we also managed to cut down expenses and yet offer our staff a modest increase after a freeze of three years. On the other hand, the appointment of two new Bishops Fr. Jamal Daibes as Vicar for Jordan and Fr. Rafic Nahra as Vicar for Israel is cause for great optimism as along with the other Vicars, we are well positioned to take the LPJ to its next level of development. We are ready to tackle the many challenges that await us!



Despite the very positive nature of my reflections, our long experience living in the Holy Land has taught us that there will be many problems and setbacks ahead, whether administrative, financial, political, or social. As a matter of fact, the violence and counterviolence of the last few days is a vivid reminder of that. However, as people of hope and great faith, we have also learned how to cope with these situations, continue to be positive, and know that these trials are all part of our Christian faith. As we get ready to participate in the Palm Sunday procession and recount the various celebrations of Holy Week in Jerusalem, we also remember how lucky we are to live so close to where it all started and walk the same narrow alleyways where our Lord Jesus Christ once set foot. If this is not cause enough for optimism and celebration, then nothing else is.

Thank you all for you continued prayers and support with my best wishes for the rest of the Lent season. An early Happy Easter wish to all!

*Sami El-Yousef
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4 April 2022*