



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

"One more hour of war will not solve the problem but aggravate it"

Interview with Gaza's parish priest



Since the start of the war that threw the Holy Land into mourning nearly three months ago, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre has mobilized to send emergency aid to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Father Romanelli, the parish priest of Gaza - who was in Bethlehem at the beginning of the conflict - continues to be in contact with his community that is suffering the worst hardships, acting as a spokesman for a population in great suffering. He granted us an interview to inform the Knights and Dames of the Order about the situation on the ground as Christmas approaches.

Father Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of Gaza's Holy Family Church, answers the phone from Jerusalem. He was not in Gaza at the beginning of the war and has not been able to return. He follows the situation with apprehension and suffering and as much as he can. As much as he can because communication with the Gaza Strip is also increasingly complicated. "Just today the satellite antenna in our compound that allowed our Christians to receive news from outside via TV was also hit. For weeks, in fact, the internet connection has been almost absent and Palestinian phone lines rarely work," he says.

The Holy Family compound is located in northern Gaza and, as Father Gabriel explains, "the authorities have confirmed to us that we are not a military target" however, as the parish priest recounts, "after the truce the shelling and fighting have increased, the danger for the 600 people who by now live permanently in the parish, is closer and more real. In recent days the solar panels of the structure, and the roof of the kindergarten as well as the water reserve tank have been hit."

The Holy Family Church facility is located in the Zaytoun neighborhood, one of the hardest hit these days, and includes the parish church and rectory, the school, two houses of Mother Teresa's sisters and one of the sisters of the Incarnate Word. The 600 Christians with the 54 disabled children, mainly Muslims, cared for by Mother Teresa's sisters live and share the little that remains among themselves and with neighbors. "Whatever you have you share: what some had put aside (some rice, pasta, cans of food) and what we received during the truce," Father Gabriel recounts. We cook three times a week by burning wood or whatever material we can find to build a fire since there is very little fuel left."

Listening to the pastor, the severity of the situation becomes clear. "400,000 people are without food and water. Now that it has started raining, the cold has arrived, and this is tragic considering how many thousands and thousands of people are living outside their homes. On the other hand, rain is the only way for so many to get water to drink." We ask about the health care issue: "The sick simply die," he replies, "as was the case for three of our Christians staying at Holy Family Church. Although we have doctors, the hospitals have been affected and often there is no way to operate. In the South, a young 34-year-old father died of appendicitis."

Father Gabriel's voice is heavy and we ask him what hope he sees looking ahead in these days of Advent when, as Christians, we are called to nourish greater hope and expectation. "I pray that salvation will come from heaven giving glory to God and peace on earth to men and women of good will," he says. "A permanent ceasefire is necessary to allow the arrival of humanitarian aid not only to the South of Gaza but also to the North, the possibility of treating the 50,000 wounded, the liberation of everyone. There are still so many people under the rubble, in addition to the 18,000 dead in Gaza and 1,200 in Israel. One more hour, one more day, one more week of war will not solve the situation but only aggravate it."

Telling of the prayer life that continues unceasingly as one of the few regular appointments in the midst of the destruction with one Mass in the morning and one in the evening in addition to the daily Rosary, Father Gabriel concludes, "I wish that the angel of the Lord can touch the hearts of the people who have responsibility and authority and that the international community will call for a cease-fire."

Elena Dini

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