Parish life in the Holy Land during the pandemic

Testimonials of the Holy Land parish priests supported by the “Covid-19 humanitarian support fund”

Last October, concluding his experience as Apostolic Administrator, Archbishop Pizzaballa described the commitment of the Dames and Knights of the Order of Holy Sepulchre to the Holy Land as the “concrete and tangible sign of Divine Providence.”

A few days later, during an interview at Palazzo della Rovere, Abp. Pizzaballa renewed his gratitude to the Order, for the extraordinary response given to the appeal launched by the Latin Patriarchate in Spring 2020, during the most critical moments of the pandemic. That appeal had in fact an “unexpected response, which went well beyond expectations.”

The request concerned help for the families in need of the Latin Patriarchate in Jordan and Palestine: the response proved to be a success of solidarity, involving thousands of members of the Order from all over the world and collecting about 3 million euros.

The generous contributions sent to the Holy Land have been widely distributed by the Latin Patriarchate to over thirty parishes in Palestine and Jordan, allowing to stem, at least in part, the very serious economic crisis that has hit the families most in difficulty. Overall, there were about 2,400 families supported on the territory of the diocese.

The stories shared with us by parish priests all photograph the same disheartening dynamic. In addition to the health emergency, there was a long and prolonged curfew that prevented many from going to work. The closure of the borders has also had an impact on an already perilous situation, so much so that the entire tourism sector and its economic activities have been completely wiped out, especially penalizing tourist resorts such as Bethlehem.

Father Rami Asakrieh, parish priest of St. Catherine (the Catholic parish located in the complex of the Basilica of the Nativity), describes a desolating situation for **Bethlehem**, a city that thrives on pilgrim tourism. When the Coronavirus came, everything stopped: hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops. The consequent closure of the checkpoints then penalized all workers commuting with Israel, who were left without employment and, therefore, without salaries.

For some time, the families relied on their savings and then on the funds available through the parish Caritas, which however soon ran out. "We have received hundreds of phone calls from families who lacked essential goods, from people who had lost their jobs. […] **In the darkest moment, just when we ran out of resources, the providential support of the Knights of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre arrived through the Latin Patriarchate**." Thanks to this help, the needs of the community were met for about two months, supporting those who were at home and had nothing left: "mothers without milk for their children, elderly people at home alone to whom no one brought medicines, food for families who had nothing to eat."

The appeal launched by the Patriarchate last spring, which was followed by that of Cardinal Filoni, highlighted the importance of the institutional presence of the Church in the area; a presence "capable of offering a significant contribution especially in the areas of education, health and social services."

The first and most important among them is undoubtedly the school, a place of inclusion and dialogue, but also a structure that in this time has paid the highest price. The health and economic emergency prevented many families from paying school fees, with negative consequences on the cash flows of the institutions and, consequently, on the payment of salaries to staff.

To avoid paralysis and guarantee the provision of the service until the end of the school year, the **general director of the schools of the Patriarchate**, **Father Jamal Khader**, has prepared a plan for sharing tasks and responsibilities involving the General Administration, principals, teachers, parents and school students.

During the same days, the Latin Patriarchate set up an emergency committee to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. There was a reduction in salaries for two months which made it possible to save jobs and guarantee the monthly payment of wages.

All this was possible thanks to the precious help of the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre who "have given further proof of being real support to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem as well as friends on whom to count in times of difficulty," reports Father Jamal, who is also pastor of Holy Family church in **Ramallah**. His parish community suffered a lot from the crisis but "the Church was close to them," providing for their basic needs, from food to health. "The solidarity among faithful and the support of the Order, have shown us the true meaning of being Church, in communion with one another, one body in Christ."

In JORDAN, the situation was no better. The pandemic hit the population particularly hard there, including its Christian minority. However, the closure of the churches for three long months did not reduce the enthusiasm for solidarity, which was expressed in constant care for the needs of the weakest.

In **Al-Zarka**, a very poor village 30 km east of Amman, this emergency is seen as an opportunity by **Sister Carmela**, one of the four Dorotee sisters who assist **Father Eyad Bader** in parish life: "What we are going through can be read as a sign from the Lord to teach us to help more, to be closer

to the people and to get to know each other." During these months, help has never failed the 600 families who comprise this reality, not even moral help: "often people came knocking on our doors just needed to be listened to and we did an apostolate of listening!"

Like **"a field hospital"** – the parish priest "Abouna" Eyad tells us – the church of Al-Zarka has responded to all kinds of needs, receiving from the Patriarchate, and therefore from the Order, about 10,000 euros to pay for bills and provide food and medicines, and a figure of around 40,000 euros for school fees, thus supporting families and teachers.

The precious help of the Knights and Dames also arrived at the parish of Christ the King of **Amman**. Even before the emergency, the order regularly provided financial support to sixty families in the parish. With the crisis caused by Covid-19, the situation has worsened, so much so that only thanks to the help of the Order many have managed to survive.

First, 6,640 Jordanian dollars (JD) arrived and were distributed in tranches to 110 families. The parish priest, **Father Marwan Hassan**, devised an ingenious method to ensure that the funds that were received fed a virtuous circuit in the area: upon agreement with the owners of the most troubled shops, he converted the money into shopping vouchers to be used in these same commercial establishments. "These coupons allowed us to support even poor businesses, helping those who needed them most," said Father Marwan, who continued: "with this solution we have helped these families to live with dignity, allowing them to independently choose what they need to buy, rather than forcing them to accept what was available," referring to the practice of distributing food packages. After two months, an additional 2,240 JDs arrived, distributed in the same way for a month, to 59 families. "You cannot imagine how much, and to what extent, these donations from the Knights and Dames have helped these poor families," he concluded.

Father Firas Aridah, parish priest in **Aboud** (Jordan), where the unemployment rate rose exponentially during the pandemic emergency, also speaks of dignity. For the first few months his parish resisted but, over time, the situation worsened. "With the support of the Patriarchate we have managed to guarantee help for everyone, every day, for ever growing needs." Among the most varied, he points out the healthcare costs offered to the family of a boy suffering from osteosarcoma: "these donations meant we avoided having to have his legs amputated," he tells us.

Being unemployed does not only mean losing one's source of income, but also suffering from inactivity. This inspired the parish not only to address basic necessities but also, as far as possible, to create opportunities: "we proposed to two people to come and help the nuns to clean the church twice a month; in this way we also give them the opportunity to re-employ themselves, entrusting them with tasks, giving them dignity."

Filippo di Grazia

(Spring 2021)