



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

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

A truly universal Church in Israel

Interview with Father Nikodemus Schnabel, Patriarchal Vicar for migrants and asylum seekers



Some 100,000 migrants and asylum seekers in Israel belong to the Catholic Church, a reminder of its universal dimension.

Father Schnabel, could you tell us who the people belonging to your Vicariate are?

We are the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers. We are the most international of the Latin Patriarchate Vicariates because we are in charge of all the Catholics who do not have the citizenship of one of the countries of the Latin Patriarchate. So, we are working with migrants and asylum seekers from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, China, Ukraine, Romania, Poland, and both English and French-speaking Africa, Latin America... and it's a very colourful Vicariate with four rites and many languages. It is very difficult to count numbers but we could say we gather about 100,000 sisters and brothers.

There is a difference in the status of these people: some people are legally here while some other people are not. Can you explain this concept further?

Our sisters and brothers live very different situations. Some of them are legally in the country. These are migrant workers mostly from the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka who through agencies came here working in the fields of caregiving, agriculture or construction work. But, for example, if one of these people – and we are speaking mostly about women (95%) – give birth, she immediately becomes illegal.

Another example is the work visa that expires automatically if the employer dies. This means that so many of them – although they arrived legally – no longer have this legal status.

Then we have also some migrant workers who came here as pilgrims, but didn't return home, stayed here and tried to find their luck. They are often employed in the cleaning sector.

Finally, we have the asylum seekers: this is the smallest group. These are people from Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia. They really try to escape from hunger, bloodshed and war, but the borders are closed – and therefore it is a shrinking phenomenon – while the migrant workers represent a rapidly growing phenomenon.



What are the main activities the Vicariate offers to these different groups?

Our Vicariate tries to support these sisters and brothers in all the fields we can. Definitely in everything connected to their religious and spiritual life starting from the liturgy (celebrating the Eucharist, the sacraments, teaching the catechism, etc.) but also from a social point of view because their life is often very difficult. In the whole of Israel, we have about 50 places from North to South where we celebrate the Eucharist in the different mother tongues and rites of the migrants.

But very often our people lack religious freedom. They cannot go to a normal Sunday Eucharist because they have to work or because very often the employers don't allow them to attend Eucharist. So, we have to be creative. For example, we have Sunday eucharists on Tuesday or Friday nights and not only in churches but very often in tents, gyms, kindergartens or very hidden places. Sometimes we meet at noon or at 1pm so, while they go shopping, they can stop for the Eucharist. Very often our people are not free to celebrate and profess their faith: when they live at home as caregivers they are often told "no cross, no New Testament, no Jesus here in our house" and this is really a big challenge.

One very important part of our work is therefore advocacy: to stand up for our marginalized and discriminated sisters and brothers and fight for the human right of religious freedom, but also, the right to life. As a church, we believe that you should have the courage to say yes to life, but here it means to become illegal as I mentioned. If we encourage to say yes to life, then we have to help the mothers.



Young people are welcomed within the activities organized by the Vicariate for Migrants.

So, we have 11 day-care centers where babies and toddlers from zero to three years of age can stay. Teachers who take care of them are migrant mothers, so that they can take care of their own child and other children. We also work on that together with Israeli organizations to offer a high-quality education. For youth we have today two after-school programs, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, as well as a fostering home in Jerusalem for children who don't have a father and whose mother has difficulty making ends meet: we take care of these kids 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but during the weekend, we try also to make sure that the children stay with their mothers.

What is really important here is to provide our people "a home far from home". It doesn't matter if they are legal or illegal, if they are young or old, they always face the challenge of being a foreigner and hear the voice saying "you don't belong here" because you have the wrong faith or the wrong skin color.

And I think our vocation is that we are a place. Sacred spaces must be safe spaces where our sisters and brothers can be weak, where they don't have to fear the government, the police or deportation but may just practice their faith, share their food, sit and chat together, and find a person who is listening to them.



Father Nikodemus Schnabel's team.

Who helps you in all that at the Vicariate?

I have a wonderful team with many religious women coming from the countries of the migrants and asylum seekers and they are always there available for the needs of our sisters (the vast majority of people in our Vicariate are women) and then I have wonderful priests who really do their best: they always go the extra mile. You should think, for example, that our people are not always in the big cities but they might live in the rural areas where there are only a few people and our priests go there to celebrate a mass only for 10 people who have only two hours free every other week.

We only have one priest from Sri Lanka, one Eritrean and one Konkani-speaking one. Imagine, for example, that there are six Konkani-speaking communities in the country and these are vibrant communities with 200 (the smallest community) to 700 people coming to a regular Eucharist, not mentioning the big Holidays.

My priests and my sisters are real heroes because they work hard and with a wonderful missionary spirit. If someone is seeking a comfortable place to wait for people to show up, this is not the experience we have here. Here you need a missionary Spirit to get out of your comfort zone and meet the people where they are. I remember very well the first night I spent visiting our parishioners together with one of our Sri Lankan sisters. I thought it was weird that we were starting our visits at 10pm but then my sister explained to me: "Father, you know, they have to work the whole day. The only free time they have is during night time because their employer is sleeping." So, we went from place to place for visits during the whole night.



Father Schnabel arrived at Palazzo della Rovere to personally thank Cardinal Filoni for the support the Order gives to the pastoral work carried out by the Vicariate he heads in Israel.

How do people in your Vicariate live their faith?

Every day here I realize how privileged I am to be able to practice my faith without fear and problems. Usually in other countries, the Church thinks about how we can motivate people to practice their faith or how we can give people the taste of the beauty of faith. Here this is not at all the issue at stake. My sisters and brothers are a wonderful Church full of desire, full of longing for God, for the sacraments and for the Word of God. People use their only free hours to gather and pray if they can.

For example, the Sri Lankan groups meet online at night at 11pm to pray and read the Bible or at 6am for an online mass. For people like them who cannot physically gather together for working constraints, the digital world has been a blessing. They have such a deep and inspiring spirituality. And for me, as a monk, priest and theologian, this is so heart-touching and I see them much closer to God than I am. When I have to preach in front of them I wonder what I could tell them... it is better to listen to them and learn from them, not vice versa.

How did you end up becoming the Vicar of this incredibly amazing reality of the Church in the Holy Land?

It is an interesting story. I'm very often asked that because I'm a monk and this is not generally the kind of activities people think a monk could be involved in because people think only about the contemplative monastic life, but they do not know that we have always had a tradition of missionary and pastoral monastic life also and that what I do therefore perfectly fits into this context.

The Latin Patriarchate asked me in July of 2021, if I would be ready to take on this position and offer this service to the Church, and I thought I could. Before then I was for two years the superior of my Monastery so I know a little bit how to run a community with two houses. I also have some diplomatic background and I know some languages for having lived abroad. I come from a family of artists and, as a child, I changed my living place 14 times, and I was raised by a single mother so there are many

aspects I can empathize, understand, and feel so comfortable with our sisters and brothers of this Vicariate. It is a great blessing for me to serve them.

The Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre are really grateful for all that your Vicariate does. Is there something specific that you were able to implement thanks to their contribution?

First of all, I have to mention that I'm myself a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, belonging to the German Lieutenancy. I'm very grateful for the support the Order of the Holy Sepulchre offers to the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers, especially when it comes to our minors, the migrant children and youth. For example, health insurance is paid for our children, but also activities such as our youth music classes.

What is the gift that this Vicariate offers the whole world?

I think that these sisters and brothers from all over the world who are now here in the Holy Land have a useful prophetic voice to show that Christianity in the Holy Land has many languages, many faces, many skin colors, many different rites.

The roots of our faith are here in the Holy Land and I like very much that we have not only the local Christians and the pilgrims but that there is also a third reality: Christians from all over the world who come here as workers or seeking refuge. God is not asking "show me your visa or show me your legal status." So, the German pilgrim, the Palestinian Christian and the migrant worker from Sri Lanka all have the same baptism and that's really heart-touching for me to feel that we are connected and one in the baptism.

Interview by Elena Dini

(April 2023)

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