



Reflections from the Holy Land – October 2023 (I) The Excitement of a New Cardinal in Jerusalem

Having just returned from Rome after attending the Consistory where twenty-one new Cardinals from all corners of the globe were installed, one certainly stands out. Since the announcement was made in July, there has been a lot of excitement and anticipation in the Holy Land. What was most striking is the level of happiness and pride demonstrated from all walks of our local society. This was not only a clear recognition for His Beatitude for his long and distinguished service for the Church of Jerusalem, but also for Jerusalem itself with great hopes that the issue of Jerusalem as the spiritual capital of all monolithic faiths will get the attention it deserves as a city to be shared by all and open to all believers. We now await with great patience the return of His Beatitude Cardinal Pizzaballa so that the celebrations will begin in all four countries of the Diocese, one after the other within the next few weeks. Once the celebrations end, the real hard work will start to safeguard the interests of the faithful we are here to serve, as well as to continue to build our societies with the Christian values at heart.



As we move forward, one must acknowledge the work of the distinguished institutions that make significant contributions in our local societies whether in education, health, or social services. A few days ago, Bethlehem University celebrated its 50th anniversary providing quality education and it was a pure joy to be able to be part of the celebrations having spent 24 years of my professional career there. Also, in a few days Caritas Baby Hospital will celebrate its 70th anniversary of distinguished healthcare to marginalized children. This is an indication of the strong institutional presence and the pride of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land. These two



institutions join hundreds more serving hundreds of thousands in the Diocese quietly day in and day out and doing the work of governments in some instances! Congratulations to both institutions on these important milestones.

Our schools started the new school year on time a few weeks ago with improvements in some schools and expansions in others. The school in Jubeiha added a new floor over the summer to cater to the waiting list and admit new students. New equipment and furniture were introduced in some schools. However, the needs continue to be great, and we will continue to seek the resources to upgrade the schools to meet modern standards let alone provide our teachers and staff the proper capacity building to equip them with the tools to excel. As for the pastoral activities, they continue to witness a sharp increase as additional funds were secured this year. The first phase of the pastoral center in Haifa being the youth chaplaincy building is under major renovation; the spiritual formation center in Beit Jala was officially inaugurated a few weeks ago and already the demand on the offered courses is phenomenal. This center will open the Seminary to the community and vice versa. Also, in Sweifieh, renovations are underway to establish the beginnings of a pastoral center that will house the family center among other units there. The dream of His





Beatitude to strengthen the faith formation and provide quality services and support is slowly but surely being realized.

The area that continues to suffer is the humanitarian support area where the demand continues to exceed the available funds despite our efforts to lobby for additional funds. Also, the funds for some of the youth and women empowerment programs are at the end of their cycle. The first phase of the most successful Afaq program in collaboration with Bethlehem University will conclude at the end of the year as well. Major efforts will be made in the coming few weeks / months to secure funds for the normal humanitarian programs as well as the various empowerment programs so that these critical programs can continue to touch and support those who are weak, vulnerable and are most in need.

It was also a great pleasure to host the bi-annual visit of the Holy Land Commission which started in Jordan about two weeks ago, then moved to Palestine and Israel. It is always great to make all these field visits and engage in strategic discussions on our needs and how a match can be made to meet those needs



with the limited resources available from the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. The feedback received was most encouraging, and the strategic discussions promising. The visits not only exposed the good work done in projects, schools, pastoral and humanitarian support, but certainly was an opportunity to talk to a wide range of stakeholders including administrators, students, teachers, refugees and asylum seekers to get a real sense of the needs directly from the source. Again, great

accomplishments can be claimed, but also great needs exposed along the way. With the collaboration of all, our hope is to continue to bridge the gap and continue to be of service. In this regard, the strategic planning exercise is in full motion, and everyone is taking it very seriously hoping that this will help set the priorities of our future interventions.

Over the past few days, the matter of attacks on Christian pilgrims, churches, and institutions came to the spotlight as the spitting on the cross especially in the Old City of Jerusalem increased dramatically especially during the high holidays of our Jewish brothers and sisters. There has been wide condemnation locally and internationally of this trend and our hope is that these phenomena can be brought to an end soon. In all cases it should not deter future visits and we hope that all faithful who wish to make pilgrimages to the Holy Land will continue with their plans and come to be in solidarity as Jerusalem should be the city of peace accommodating and open to all faiths. Thank you for your continued support and God bless!



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