



End of Year Reflections from the Holy Land Merry Christmas

As we approach Christmas, one remembers what Christmas 2020 looked like at the height of the pandemic with lockdowns practically everywhere and virtual tree lightings. By contrast, this year such events are live and back to normal despite the fact that the pandemic is still with us, and new variants turn countries to red and restrict international travel. It is clear that the pandemic will be with us for a long time, and we are all trying to find ways to live with it. Despite some return to normalcy, life continues to be very difficult for many, especially those whose income is dependent on the pilgrims and travel industries. Israel fares well with its unemployment rate back to 5% after reaching 27% at the height of the pandemic. Palestine has to deal with unemployment rates of some 28% in the West Bank and around 50% in Gaza, while Jordan's is around 25%. These high rates especially in Palestine and Jordan meant that the demands on our various humanitarian programs quadrupled during the pandemic and our staff are overwhelmed trying to be of help. Despite this hundreds of Iraqi refugees continue to benefit from such support as well as tens of families in Jerusalem caught in the politics of the city, not to mention around 70 youth who are employed through the job creation program in desperate Gaza. This is in addition to the thousands supported through the core humanitarian programs of social assistance, medicines, education support, and medical emergencies.



One of the down turns of the year was another war on Gaza after a senseless escalation that led to major destruction not only to buildings and infrastructure but to people's souls. The solidarity visit of His Beatitude Patriarch Pizzaballa to Gaza two weeks after hostilities ended was most welcome by all and a true sign that those who are the weakest and most marginalized will always have priority within the church. Funding intensified to our brothers and sisters there through the outstanding work in Gaza in cooperation with the parish priest Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, who despite his illness opted to remain in Gaza and be that beacon of hope to our people there.



The educational pillar of the LPJ fared very well during the latter part of the year as schools were back in session in class in September despite the pandemic. Over 19,000 students attending 44 of our schools in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine were most happy to return to school after the online experience of the year before. The happiness was evident on the faces of the students who missed the lived-in class experience. The downside was that we lost a few hundred students from our schools who for financial reasons opted to move to public schools since they felt that they get the same online experience during the pandemic for free there. Many miss the value set and experience our schools offer and long for the day to return. We hope many will actually return as normalcy continues to return to the education sector.



The pastoral activities witnessed the most marked improvement during the year. Churches are open normally and all pastoral activities are almost back to normal adopting all health precautions. Summer camps were conducted for thousands of children and youth in most parishes, and they were busier than ever. Weddings, baptisms, and funerals now draw hundreds at pre-pandemic levels as governmental regulations were relaxed. Religious celebrations drew large crowds, with the recent Our Lady Queen of Palestine main celebration at Deir Rafat drawing a record crowd of over 3,000 faithful. The Synod 2021-2023 for a synodal church was launched under the theme communion, participation, and mission, during the celebration with a beautiful homily by His Beatitude challenging the faithful to take an active role in the church and to let their voice be heard.



To cap a very busy year His Holiness Pope Francis just made a two-day visit to Cyprus, the fourth “underserved” country in our Diocese. The focus was on the suffering of refugees caught up in political and economic turmoil in their countries of origin and either willingly or were forced to flee their countries seeking a better life for them and their families elsewhere. The LPJ has been pioneer in serving migrants and asylum seekers both in Israel and in Jordan, and His Holiness’ messages only encourages us not only to stay the course, but to intensify the efforts to serve the underserved and help them strengthen their faith in order to find the hope so critical for them to keep moving forward despite their daily pain. This will certainly include humanitarian support, but more importantly pastoral care.



As we conclude another difficult and uncertain year, one can only reflect on this journey and be thankful for all of God’s graces. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is the need for total flexibility not to forget the power of prayer and the need to stay close to one’s faith in order to find the strength to tackle the many challenges. As was the case last year, we could not do what we did without the generous support of so many around the world, especially members of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher as well as several foundations and charities around the world for the trust they placed in us being a medium of their support to reach those most in need and to stay faithful to our mission. Merry Christmas to all with our best wishes for a healthy and more normal 2022.

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