

Israel and Hamas. Father Patton (Custos): “Re-interpreting the violent verses in Scripture.” Msgr. Shomali (Patriarchate): “Break the cycle of hatred”

(Jerusalem) “It is important to continue to revive religious pilgrimages, not to let the desire to visit the Holy Places diminish, and to encourage groups of believers, however small, to undertake the journey. Despite what is happening in Gaza, pilgrimages to the Holy Land can still take place, all the more so if, as we hope, many airlines will resume flights to Israel in the coming weeks. I firmly believe that the presence of pilgrims will contribute to easing the ongoing tensions.”



Custos of the Holy Land, welcomed a group of pilgrims travelling with Diòmira Travel, comprising nine priests from the dioceses of Milan, Piacenza and Cremona, who are currently (from 8 January) on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. “You are the first group of pilgrims we have seen since 7 October last year, the day of the terrible terrorist attack in Israel by Hamas, which triggered the outbreak of war in Gaza and unleashed a strong wave of emotion that makes it difficult to find viable ways to end the violence and reach a ceasefire,” said the Custos. For the Custos, “it is important

to promote peace-building, starting with communication, which must exclude violent speech and the the underlying violence in words and in their modes of expression.

Dehumanising words that portray others as “less than human” to the point of justifying their extermination, as happened to the Jews in recent history, must be avoided.” Father Patton said he was “touched by the words of the representative of the families of the hostages kidnapped by Hamas, Rachel Goldberg-Polin, who stressed the need for Israelis and Palestinians to recognise each other's suffering. “As long as people remain locked up in their own suffering,” the Franciscan explained, “they will grow angry, while conversely it is possible to nourish feelings of genuine compassion and mercy, as taught to us by the crucified Christ.” **Re-interpreting violent texts.** In this context, inter-religious dialogue and reflection on the use of language in religion, can play a very important role. Indeed, the holy Scriptures of all religions, however peaceful, contain some violent texts. These texts should be reinterpreted in the light of the fundamental core of revelation. Religious leaders, Jews, Christians and Muslims, have a duty to reinterpret the violent passages in religious texts in a spirit of peace. The Catholic Church has made great progress in the last hundred years and more, as reflected in the Magisterium. However, it will necessarily be a years-long process because, as Patton points out, “this non-violent reinterpretation must be incorporated into the common sense of the believers of the various religions. It is a very important step, because in a context like ours, religion is not valued for the purpose of encounter. “In our schools, attended by both Christian and Muslim pupils”, the Custos noted, “all students recite the prayer of St Francis: 'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace', in no uncertain terms. This helps to foster an attitude open to encounter and dialogue.” Meanwhile, however, “instability and insecurity, including social and economic insecurity, experienced by local Christians, is causing many to want to emigrate. For our part, we try to help Christians in every way possible to sustain their hopes.” The Custos urged the pilgrim priests to reflect on what is happening with “*equivicinity* - a word dear to Pope Francis - which requires us to

share the suffering of Israelis and Palestinians. Recognising the suffering of one side is not enough. As Christians, we are called to act as a 'joining link.' "One positive element in the current tragedy," he concluded, "is that at the international level everyone has recognised the need to find a political solution to the Palestinian question. And the most viable solution is the 'two Peoples, two States solution', which the Holy See has consistently upheld."



Vicar

General of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. He said that the pilgrimage was "a courageous and highly significant gesture in the present circumstances." Msgr. Shomali went straight to the point: "We have never seen such a long war in Gaza, and the situation in the West Bank is very serious." "Hatred is widespread," remarked the Vicar, "and hatred breeds violence. We are trapped in an endless vicious cycle. It will take generations to undo all this hatred." The Vicar spoke of the situation in Gaza, notably of the small Latin parish of the Holy Family. It is the only Catholic parish in the Strip: "Two thirds of Gaza's Christians, about 600 people, have taken refuge there. They have all seen their homes bombed. It is important to provide them with all the support we can. The Strip is facing shortages of electricity, water, medicines, food and diesel to run the generators."

