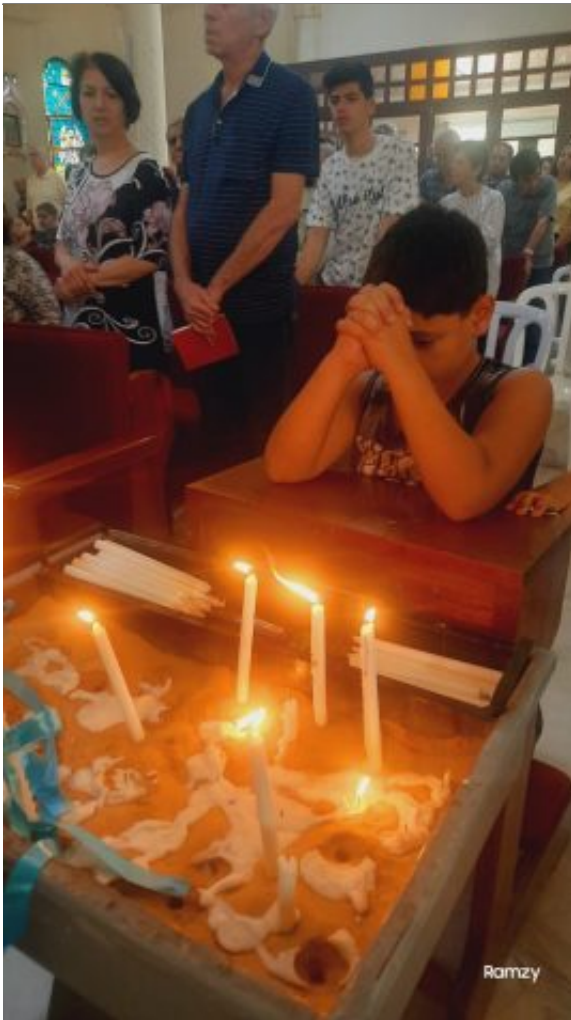

Israel and Hamas: the 'Way of the Cross' of Christians in Bethlehem

“Bethlehem and the Holy Land belong to everyone. They belong not only to the Palestinians, but also to Christians, Muslims and Jews. I am 63 years-old and for the first time I have not celebrated Christmas, I have not experienced the joy of Christmas”: **Nasri Kumsieh**, architecture graduate from Milan’s Polytechnic, told SIR. Nasri had a long career working closely with President Yasser Arafat, for whom he designed several presidential palaces in Palestinian districts. He now lives in Beit Sahour, a town on the outskirts of Bethlehem, which is famous for being the place where, according to the New Testament, an angel announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds. The war in Gaza and the severe restrictions imposed by Israel after 7 October, the day of Hamas’ terror attack, have virtually extinguished all the festive lights in Bethlehem and its neighbouring towns. There were no decorated trees, no lights, no pilgrims. Hotels and souvenir shops were closed everywhere for what will be remembered as “the saddest Christmas ever.” Without aid or subsidies from the Palestinian Authority, most local Christians employed in the religious tourism sector have been out of work for more than 100 days. The only exception is a small group of nine priests from the diocese of Milan, Piacenza and Cremona, on a pilgrimage organised by Diòmira Travel and who, to the great surprise of the local community, arrived in the birthplace of Jesus a few days ago. They are the first Italian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land since 7 October. **Abandoned by all.** Nasri repeats to us the words with which he welcomed the priests from Italy: “I am Greek Orthodox, my wife is Catholic and we are used to celebrating every Christmas, the Christian, the Orthodox and finally the Armenian. As Christians, we feel abandoned by everyone, just as Christ felt abandoned on the cross. Nevertheless, we believe that there is always a spark of hope, and this light is the presence of the pilgrims who have arrived here to visit the Holy Places. They are the first we have seen since the outbreak of the war.” But Nasri also believes that hope is rooted in the end of the war in Gaza, the latest in a conflict that has lasted more than 75 years. “We have the right to live like all the peoples of the world,” he says.

“We Palestinians are paying the price for the Holocaust of the Jews in Europe.



Jews once lived peacefully in Arab countries, they were citizens like everyone else. Even today there are two Jewish Palestinian MPs in the Palestinian parliament. There are also about 4,000 Jews with Palestinian passports in Nablus. Contrary to what is written in many newspapers, we Palestinians cannot be anti-Semitic because we are also sons of Abraham. The horrific events of 7 October have brought a renewed sense of urgency to the Palestinian question, which had seen "positive developments with the peace agreements 30 years ago in Oslo, then in Madrid and Washington". Sadly - Nasri notes "everything has come to a standstill and the world is watching in silence as Jewish settlers occupy land in the West Bank." "What is happening in Gaza is extremely serious, a veritable massacre is taking place, with deaths, wounded, bombings, destroyed houses, hospitals, churches, mosques. There is a shortage of aid, 2.3 million people in Gaza, dying in plain sight, and nobody is raising their voices." "I am a Christian and I know that peace was born here in Bethlehem, with Jesus Christ, and it will flourish here again", he remarked. "One day we, the Palestinians, will also be independent and we will live in peace side by side with Israel. But we need the help of the international community". "It is not about defending the cause of a political party or a Palestinian faction, such as Fatah or Hamas," he explains. "There are extremists and fanatics in all peoples, both Israelis and Palestinians. We just want to live in peace in an independent and sovereign state. For Nasri, the Two peoples, Two states solution is "the only viable option." Speaking of the "identity crisis" facing local Christians, **Charlie Abou Saada**, a member of the Melkite Church in Bethlehem, said: "We are Arabs but we are not supporters of Hamas, we would like to be pro-Jewish but we can't be because they are occupying our lands. As disciples of Christ, we are called to love our enemies, but it's not that simple." Is there hope for peace? "We Palestinians want to live and be treated as human beings. As long as this situation continues, there will be no chance for us to reach a just peace. World peace starts from the Holy Land." Abou Saada made an appeal for prayer: "Pray for the Church of the Holy Land, which is suffering so much, pray for the Christians of Gaza, living in the midst of a catastrophe. The local

Church has been severely weakened by the Israeli occupation, and the only solution is justice, which means allowing each people to have what is due to them.” “To this day, we see no light at the end of the tunnel”” says Abou Saada. "The young people of Bethlehem will all tell you of their dream of leaving in search of a dignified future. We have nothing in Bethlehem, no oil, no gas, only the Nativity, thanks to which Christians resist and survive. But without the pilgrimages, it will be a certain death. Let us pray for new courageous political leaders who will be able to improve the situation.”



), a young mother from Bethlehem, echoing the words of Nasri and Abou Saada. “All we can do is pray,” she told SIR, explaining that she had written a message to her friends who had asked her about the situation in Bethlehem after 7 October, but had not sent it for fear of being tracked down by the Israeli army. “We are not allowed to express ourselves freely here, Israel controls us,” she denounced. "Many people in Bethlehem are planning to leave, but my family and I don't want to, because this is our land! This is the holy land! The beloved land.” "What we are seeing," she says, her voice breaking with emotion, "has gone too far. Many of us believe that after Gaza it will be the West Bank's turn, so it will be our turn". “If I speak, I risk my life, I risk what little freedom I have left,” she concludes, “just thinking about the future makes me want to cry! It hurts me to live in this world. It feels like our lives are worthless. But I am sure of one thing: this is our cross. And just as Jesus carried his on Calvary, we carry ours with love and faith. That is why we have chosen to continue living in our Holy Land, walking another long and painful path. My thoughts go to the suffering of the Christians of Gaza; it is also for them that we remain and for whom we hold out.”

Daniele Rocchi