
Holy Land. Sister Tighe (Caritas Jerusalem): “Resume dialogue to curb the tensions. Palestinians are losing hope”

(From Jerusalem) “We are guided by the beacon of hope that should not be confused with optimism. They are two different things. The situation in the Holy Land, involving Israelis and Palestinians, has been at a standstill for a long time and there is no sign of a resumption of a negotiating course.”



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Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are losing all hopes in the future,

they can't see any light at the end of the tunnel. The youngest ones are growing up brooding anger, all they have seen are wars and clashes, compelled to withstand unacceptable living conditions, without ever being able to exit beyond the wall that imprisons them and prevents them from socializing with the rest of the world. But they resist. They carry on even if they have no food, water and electricity, even without medical assistance. But when you lose hope it's hard to move on." The nun reiterated these words during a brief informal meeting with the group of bishops of the **Holy Land Coordination (HLC)** visiting the Holy Land from 11 to 16 January for their traditional pilgrimage of solidarity with the local Christian communities, including the “small” one - only 117 Catholics - of the Latin parish in the Gaza Strip.

Gaza and the West Bank. The Director of Caritas of the Mother Church of Jerusalem, starts by

describing to SIR "the current situation" in Gaza, "the largest open-air prison in the world". "We have been working in Gaza and the Palestinian Territories for many years. Entire generations have been born and raised under occupation, deprived and humiliated in many ways."

"Humiliation is another form of poverty in this land."

underlined the woman religious, adding: "Never as in this last period has it become increasingly difficult to carry out the mission." The reference is not only to the ever-increasing tensions but also to US President Trump's decision to cut funding for the UN aid programme directed at more than 5 million Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).

"Those cuts - Sister Tighe explained – have caused serious difficulties to many humanitarian organizations, such as UNRWA, that many people turned to for food, medicines and assistance. Caritas, despite a few difficulties, thanks to various sources of support, has so far managed to ensure assistance, including health care offered by our medical centre in Gaza, thanks to the help of physicians and specialists. **The continuing state of crisis in the Strip has led to more poverty.** People who previously were not in need of assistance are now turning to us for help. The Israeli blockade is contributing to this situation. Sister Tighe repeated

"There is an urgent need to lift the embargo and open the crossings for people to be allowed out of the Strip for medical treatment and work. Israel is perfectly capable of controlling inflows and outflows."

"Most of our work in the West Bank," said the director of Caritas Jerusalem, " concerns the development and implementation of projects aimed at job creation, education and agriculture, rather than health care. In Ramallah we primarily provide medical services to elderly people who don't receive State support. Normally they are looked after by family members or neighbours. Caritas has created a consortium with other humanitarian agencies offering in-home health care."

Seeds of hope beyond the wall. "I continue hoping for peace," said the Irish nun, "although, to be honest, I don't see how it can be achieved at the moment, either alone or together, by Palestinians and Israelis. All that is happening now seems to be distancing the 'Two Peoples, Two States' solution". Sister Tighe's gaze goes to the "separation wall, the settlements that are dividing the West Bank into two parts.

The Israeli settlements are well connected to each other while Palestinian areas are increasingly fragmented and lacking in territorial contiguity. Palestinians are also separated inside the West Bank. Gaza is separated from both Israel and the West Bank."

The HLC Bishops had the opportunity to visit the conglomerate of Palestinian villages and Israeli settlements together with the Israeli NGO "**Ir Amim**", whose mission is for Jerusalem to become a city shared by the two peoples. "It's hard to think of a sustainable future but a political dialogue is necessary to diminish the tensions. To believe in peace is a challenge, and for this we must pray." Christians are called to pray for peace, as Pope Francis continually asks for, "although their living conditions here are very difficult - remarked Sister Tighe -. But I believe that their faith is a shining light in the darkness of this region."

"The role of Christians throughout the Middle East is to sow seeds of hope and justice, rooted in the memory of the death and Resurrection of Christ."



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Some seeds seem to be sprouting, in Lebanon, in Iraq where, Sister Tighe concluded, "the young generations are calling for peace, justice and freedom. They speak with one voice, without differences of ethnicity or religious belief. They are reaffirming their desire to live together, in freedom, with a dignified future ahead of them. It's a question of humanity."

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