
Coronavirus Covid-19. Nativity Church in Bethlehem closes. Father Patton (Custos of the Holy Land): “We comply with the authorities’ provisions”

All schools, mosques, and churches in the district of Bethlehem and Jerico were ordered closed for 14 days after four suspected cases of coronavirus were found in a hotel in Bethlehem. “The provision of the Palestinian health ministry includes the Nativity Church.”



The provision was confirmed to SIR by the Custos of the Holy Land, Father **Francesco Patton**. From his quarantine in the monastery of Saint Savior in Jerusalem - Father Patton had participated in the meeting of bishops on the Mediterranean in Bari (19-23 February) - the Custos also fears *“the eventual closing of St. Catherine's Church, adjacent the Nativity, by order of the same Ministry. A statement from the Custody is due to be released on this subject,”* he informed SIR. Moreover, *we are planning a joint communiqué with the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Churches (the other two Christian communities with whom the Franciscans collaborate in the administration of the Basilica, ed.'s note).* The Custody of the Holy Land," Father Patton remarked, *"is committed to the directives given to us by both the Palestinian and Israeli ministries of Health. We have not yet received instructions to close churches and sanctuaries from the Israeli ministry."*



Immagine non disponibile

As regards the precautions against the spread of the virus, “the provisions established by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem also apply to us.” On the basis of information received from SIR, Palestinian authorities have prohibited groups of pilgrims from entering Bethlehem and Jericho. They also ordered closing schools and offices in the two Districts for the next two weeks and suspending all sports activities. Suspected cases of infection are being monitored in an ad hoc facility in Bethlehem while a hotel in Beit Jala has been designated as a quarantine site. The priest of Beit Jala, Father Hanna Salem, who cites Palestinian police sources, told SIR that “no Italian pilgrims, let alone quarantined pilgrims, have entered into Bethlehem and surrounding areas since last Sunday.” In the meantime Israel has imposed further restrictions, as confirmed by the Custos of the Holy Land:

“As of today, Israel barred entry to travellers arriving from France, Germany, Spain, Austria and Switzerland.”

Alitalia also plans to discontinue flights to Israel (from 11 to 28 March) owing to the coronavirus. The Italian airline had already reduced its daily flights from 4 to one over the past few days.

The impact of the coronavirus is also affecting pilgrimages, as anticipated a few days ago by SIR:

“A large number of European countries are cancelling bookings for visits, liturgies and celebrations in the Holy Sites.”

“There are still pilgrims here at the moment,” said Fr Patton, “but not as many as in previous years. We will probably see a drop in arrivals in the coming months and it will hit the already fragile Palestinian economy and our Christian communities that live on tourism and pilgrimages.” It is largely believed that there may be further restrictions both in Israel and in Palestine: “We will see how the virus develops in the Holy Land - Father Patton added - people have been infected and the next steps of the authorities to contain and overcome the virus will depend on the extent to which the virus spreads”. At this point the only thing left to do is *“to be patient and accept these situations and restrictions. I hope that the arrival of the summer season will reduce the spread, as the experts say, to resume a somewhat normal life. There remains concern for those infected, especially in Palestine, where health care facilities are not as numerous as in Israel.”* Comfort also comes from prayer. In the Missal,” the Custos pointed out, “we find prayers against natural calamities and illnesses, and the litany ‘deliver us from plagues, and therefore from infectious diseases, deliver us from hunger and deliver us from wickedness, from all forms of violence’. Easter is in just over a month. Let us pray that all Easter services may be solemnly celebrated.”

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