

## Coronavirus Covid-19: difficulties for Catholic schools in the Holy Land. Those in Jericho and Bethlehem risk closing

"Covid-19 halted pilgrimages to the Holy Land. This caused major economic and social difficulties to all families that lived chiefly off tourism, especially in the Palestinian Territories. Families whose children attend Franciscan schools (Holy Land School), especially in Bethlehem and Jericho, are struggling to pay tuition. **By helping them we support these children's right to study.**"



. parish priest of the small parish of the Good Shepherd in Jericho (550 faithful), a centre of ancient biblical tradition, located on the eastern slopes of the Judean plain, some 20 km from Jerusalem and 8 km from the Dead Sea. Jericho is the city whose walls fell at the sound of Joshua's trumpets (1200 B.C.); it is the place where, as we read in the Gospel, Christ healed the blind beggar Bartimaeus and met the rich chief among the Publicans and tax collector, Zacchaeus. The latter, equally small in stature as he was curious, climbed on a sycamore tree to have a better view of Christ passing through the crowd. Noting his presence among the branches, Jesus called him to meet him and gave him the 'credit' that as tax collector he had never granted to any of the people. **Crisis and pandemic.** Father Mario is also the director of the Holy Land School, the only local Christian school, with approximately 900 students, the vast majority of whom are Muslims. The classes "are mixed" and extend from Nursery to High School.



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"We are the gateway to the Jordan Valley, largely discussed at the moment because of Israel's unilateral annexation plan, together with other parts of the West Bank," the friar told SIR, concerned about the potential developments in the Jericho area which, although located in "zone A", and thus under Palestinian Authority, is surrounded by areas controlled by Israel ("zone C"). This situation leads to numerous communication difficulties with the rest of the Palestinian territories and limitations to the mobility of its 40 thousand inhabitants, due to the presence of Israeli checkpoints. "We live in a deprived zone - said Father Mario - and the situation grew worse with the Covid-19. The pandemic, in fact, has annihilated Jericho's economy, which is based on tourism, pilgrimages and agriculture. Damage was also caused to related industries: handicrafts, services, restaurants, hotels, agricultural production sites that restocked them. Many heads of families were left unemployed." That's when the school in Jericho started to face problems. "Without work - the director said - families can't afford to pay tuition, which is already very low, approximately 600 Euros a year. The aid we receive from the Custody of the Holy Land is not enough to cover the needs. There are 75 employees including teachers, administrators and workers, whose families are now in serious difficulty. Tuition fees have not been increased for the last five years to allow more families to register their children in school, but now we need help. We hope that Covid-19 will loosen its grip in Israel and Palestine. In fact, there

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have been new cases of contagion. Only if the situation improves will the pilgrims be able to return and restart the economy.”



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The school crisis is yet another facet of the social and economic crisis in Jericho. A further blow to the whole area in the light, Father Mario pointed out, “of the high level of education and training offered. Many families dream of a better future for their children thanks to our educational opportunities. The word that characterizes the Holy Land School of Jericho is 'beauty' - underlined the director -.

**Beauty inspires responsibility and participation.**

We teach our pupils to seek beauty in everything they see and do, starting with caring for themselves. The results are there for everyone to see: future engineers, lawyers, policemen, computer scientists, doctors, many young specialists have graduated from our school.” “In our classrooms we banned words like 'difficult' and 'impossible' that mark the hard life of so many of our students - remarked Father Mario - We teach them that there are no difficult or impossible things, but only things requiring a greater commitment, sacrifice and more time to achieve them. The word 'difficult' is a barrier. In this period we have been seeing how true it is.”



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"We did not open our school to make a profit," Father Mario said without mincing words. "The purpose of the school is to offer, in a Franciscan spirit, a service to the population by educating young people in peace, tolerance, respect for rights and human dignity. In a land of conflict like this, these values are indispensable. We try to educate our students by helping them to elevate themselves, just as Zacchaeus did when he climbed the sycamore tree to see Jesus. *Our school wants to be for them what the sycamore tree was for Zacchaeus: a tool to advance and broaden new horizons, to encounter Beauty and Goodness*", concluded Father Mario.

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