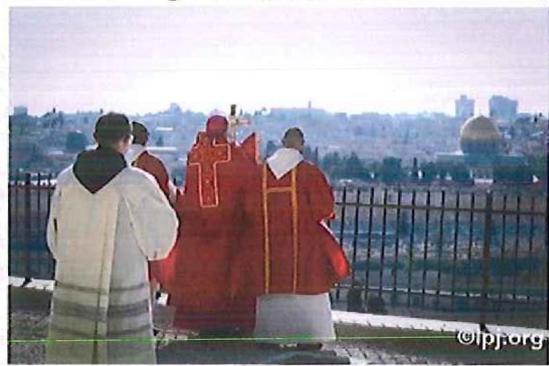




## Reflections from the Holy Land Easter Greetings

I had the full intention to send these reflections last week during Holy Week. However, my 99-year-old dad passed away peacefully on Palm Sunday and I was pre-occupied with the funeral arrangements and coming to terms with our loss. This was a time for further reflection as many of the traditions we observe during religious holidays, most notably during Holy Week were passed on from one generation to the next, especially in my family that has been in the Old City of Jerusalem for centuries, My grandfather was born during the Ottoman rule of Jerusalem, my father during British mandate Palestine, myself during Jordanian rule, and my children during Israeli rule. Four generations born in the same city, each under a different governing authority. However, what has been a constant in our lives is the centrality of the Church and its institutions. The traditions and celebrations, especially as they come to life during Holy Week are passed on faithfully from generation to generation despite the continuing decline in numbers due to immigration, Jerusalem, the city of peace, will continue to be proud of the various generations that have passed through the city despite all its turbulent history, and the rich traditions will surely be passed on. Rest in Peace dear Hanna, better known as Abu Saba (after my older brother). You are certainly in a better place watching over all of us from above. You are lucky that you met the Lord during Holy Week and all its symbolism.



It is hard to believe that it has already been one full year since the official beginning of the pandemic in March and the subsequent lockdowns, closures, travel restrictions, massive unemployment and record number of people who became sick and the regrettable loss of life. What everyone thought would be behind us in a matter of a few months, might realistically end up being a few years before some normalcy returns. Life after Covid-19 will not be the same and there will be a major calibration that will take place in everything we do from work, to education, to social behavior, among others. The real question is whether humanity learned anything from the pandemic or will this be another wasted opportunity to make this a better world. I suppose only time will tell!



During Holy Week, there was a mixture of good news and bad news around us depending on your location in the Holy Land. Israel presents the best-case scenario so far with a massive

vaccination campaign that is allowing a return to a more normal life. Contrast that to Palestine and Jordan who do not have the means to match the Israeli scene, vaccination is very slow, and it will be several months before they get to comparable numbers like Israel. The health system in both countries is at full capacity with very sick patients being turned back from hospitals leading to high death rates, This certainly not only affects the health scene, but also directly affects the economic indicators, While unemployment in Israel is on the decline to about 15% from the all-time high of 27%; in both Palestine and Jordan who suffer from weak economies to begin with and now with rising unemployment reaching 40% if not more. Needless to say, that unlike the generous unemployment, social and health benefits that Israel can provide; both Jordan and Palestine must live with little or no governmental support to speak of, leading to a major increase in demand for humanitarian support, which quadrupled during the year.

One of the bright sides over the past year has been the marked increase in donations received from our friends around the world that enabled us to reach over 20,000 people with humanitarian support, bringing temporary relief to many. The painful part is that the demand is much greater and will certainly last for a longer period than the availability of funds. Thus, more sustainable solutions are under consideration though I must admit there are no quick or easy solutions. Clearly some people have adjusted better than others, but the challenges are huge, especially with the global nature of the pandemic and the fact that the suffering is everywhere.



As we celebrated Palm Sunday and the traditional procession from Bethany to the Old City, one could only reflect on the subdued number of worshippers who were able to participate, which is mostly a local crowd. Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza could not participate given the health restrictions; there were no international pilgrims in the country; and thus, the celebration was relatively quiet, but meaningful. Certainly, an upgrade from last year where the procession did not take place at all and alternate celebrations took place at the time. Thus, even though the numbers were down, and the traditional scout<sup>9</sup>'s procession did not take place, it was great to see centuries old traditions being maintained. Hopefully, next year, the situation will be different and the faithful can reach Jerusalem without restrictions to lighten up the streets with the traditionally beautiful mosaic of languages, cultures, and colors.

As we advanced into Holy Week, the various traditions and religious celebrations reminded us again of the centrality of this week to the Christian faith as Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb after his crucifixion. From Palm Sunday to Maundy he was crucified to Easter Sunday and the hope of new days, new beginnings, and new lives. Indeed, for those of us living in Jerusalem so close physically and spiritually to the holy places where all this happened, it is a time to get recharged, especially after a full year of the pandemic and hope that Easter will be a turning point for new beginnings. Happy Easter from Jerusalem, hoping that next year we will see all our friends from around the world fill the empty and sad streets of Jerusalem again and share the symbolism. Christ is Risen — He is Risen indeed!

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