



**Reflections from the Holy Land
Solidarity Visit of His Beatitude Patriarch Pizzaballa to
Gaza 14-17 June 2021**

I was privileged to be part of a delegation lead by His Beatitude Patriarch Pizzaballa to be in solidarity with the people of Gaza after the recent devastating war in May that lasted for eleven long days. Even though we watched the news from Gaza live during the war and realizing that there was widespread destruction to buildings and infrastructure, seeing it all with your own eyes and listening to the personal sad stories was a completely different experience. What was more disturbing than the physical damages was the emotional damage of the whole population of Gaza who feel helpless and abandoned and are traumatized. Elderly as well as children and all age groups in between pleaded that they need psychosocial interventions and a period of personal rehabilitation before they can resume their normal lives amidst all the destruction. Thus, our job was not an easy one to offer material support, encouragement, and prayers, realizing also our own limitations given the continued blockade of Gaza which started in 2007, and the continued threats by both sides that the ceasefire may only be a breather, and the next round is just around the corner. With this backdrop, I reflect on a memorable four-day journey.



During the visit, three Catholic schools were visited (Latin Patriarchate, Holy Family and Rosary Sisters) and there was emphasis on the important role these schools play. Meetings with teachers, staff, students, and parents exposed the same frustrations and a plea to let the world know that the people of Gaza are humans that deserve to be treated as such and seek to live a normal life away from violence. "Allow the children to live their childhood and not lose their innocence" one parent said! His Beatitude stressed that they should not underestimate the importance of



"Resilience through Education" and the important role of schools to learn, teach, think critically, express themselves and communicate. The visit to the Rosary Sisters School was very painful seeing all the damage created in a few minutes to the hard work of construction and development that lasted for many years. "It takes a very long time and is very difficult to build yet very easy and quick to destroy" exclaimed one teacher. Yet in all school visits, the positive spirit was evident, and students and teachers were eager to show their accomplishment despite all

the misery. Teachers spoke about their heroic effort to continue to teach online during the pandemic with limited internet and electrical supply as Gaza lives on an average of 5 hours of electricity per day. Students performed the traditional Dabke dance and scout troupes received us with traditional music. A true sign that despite it all, the people of Gaza are strong and cherish life and always find ways to cope and thrive despite their harsh living conditions.

The visit also included stops at the Daughters of Charity homes for children with special needs as well as the elderly and a visit to Caritas medical center. In both locations, it was great to see that their services were uninterrupted and that both locations are witnessing physical expansions to enable them to provide more and better services for the most disadvantaged within the Gaza community. This is certainly a sign that our institutions in Gaza are strong and there to stay to provide services with the Christian values at heart. One of the highlights was also a meeting with members of the parish in Gaza who reflected not only on the war destruction, but more importantly on the continued blockade and the prison like conditions they live which has broken families with the lack of permits to visit immediate family on the West Bank, their inability to get timely permits for medical treatment, nor permits to attend funerals or weddings of immediate family in Bethlehem or Zababdeh. They expressed their frustration at the lack of a permanent solution to their problems and having to live from one war to the next with each generating more destruction.



Another highlight of the visit was a meeting with the beneficiaries of the Job Creation program benefiting 65 families in Gaza by providing decent employment and training as well as a dignified income. Of all the support programs in Gaza, this is probably the one that makes a significant and direct impact in supporting the Gaza Christian community. Again, it was painful to hear the personal stories as many sustained damages to their homes during the war and are traumatized by the experience. Their main concern naturally is what will happen to them when their two-year employment ends if the Gaza situation remains what it is today with 70% unemployment for the women and youth groups. There are no clear answers except our promise to continue to find ways to support them. In this regard, there will also be an expansion of the Thomas Aquinas Training Center so that these youth can benefit from expanded training programs.



The early hours of our third day in Gaza gave us a small taste of what the Gaza people have witnessed during four wars. A location that is a few hundred meters away from where we were staying was shelled at 1:09 a.m. that caused the building to shake and filled the air with the smell of explosives for over an hour. As I was recounting the terrifying experience, I saw smiles and repeated comments that this was a very small sample of what they witness regularly! What a way to live daily not knowing when or where a major shelling will take place or what damage it will create. Many said that they have their special suitcase which includes their passports, birth and other certificates, any precious belongings, and a few clothing items ready by the door, in case they have to leave on short notice. What a way to live! That same day, His Beatitude insisted on

visiting main destruction sites as well as families who sustained damages to their homes. This was a very painful experience given the extensive destruction to residential towers, public buildings, roads and infrastructure. It seemed that nothing was spared. Noticeable was the presence of heavy demolishing equipment and Egyptian workers who are assisting demolishing the many unstable building surrounding shelled structures. Thus, the misery continues as many owners have to bear the cost of demolition before they can even think of reconstruction. On a positive note, The LPJ committed to fix damages at 32 homes that did not have other means of support to allow people to safely return to some normal life.

The highlight of the visit was the spiritual and pastoral dimension. Visits of His Beatitude to the elderly and sick in their homes was most appreciated, as well as the children with special needs and the elderly at the Daughters of Charity Homes. Blessing of the Virgin Mary fountain at the Thomas Aquinas Center highlighted the importance of this center in not only giving training to the youth in life and professional skills but also in theological studies. The highlight was certainly the holy mass on our last day there with the confirmation of 3 children, the first communion to 18 children and the baptism of one child. This was a very joyful celebration and is a sign of a community that is alive and close to its faith. During his various spiritual messages, His Beatitude reflected on the teachings of the week during our stay being "Love Thy Enemy" and "Forgiveness", and reflecting at the great challenge, especially in Gaza and immediately after a war, on exercising these teachings. Yet he continued that if we are to claim to be true Christians, we must listen and reflect and be able to practice these teachings as this is the only way to have an inner peace and truly live a Christian life despite all the difficulties.



The most difficult part of the visit was to say goodbye, and to return to one's normal life knowing that despite all the encouragement, prayers, and supportive words all of us gave, especially His Beatitude, we are leaving behind a lot of destruction whether physical or emotional. We have committed that we will do what we can to continue to support our brother and sisters in Gaza, to advocate on their behalf for a dignified and just life and continue to be in solidarity with them. Our appreciation goes to our supporters from around the world who from day one expressed their willingness to support, even without us asking. In a particular way our appreciation goes to all the local parishes in Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Cyprus who generously contributed to support Gaza through the appeal from His Beatitude under the theme charity starts at home; to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem; the Friends of the Holy Land in the U.K; Manos Unidas in Spain; DVHL and Archdiocese of Cologne in Germany; Oeuvre de l'Orient in France; and many many others who contributed financially or through their solidarity and prayers. Please note that the people of Gaza truly appreciate your support. Keep Gaza in your prayers and please advocate whenever and wherever you can so that the core issues are resolved, and that Gaza is spared more rounds of destruction and violence!

Sami El-Yousef
Chief Executive Officer
21 June 2021