A new language and new witnesses for a narrative of peace

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The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa reflects on the historical moment in the Holy Land following the agreement reached between Israel and Hamas, and affirms: “We have a duty toward our communities — to help them look ahead, positively and serenely, toward a different future.”

The hopes of building lasting peace in the Holy Land, the difficulties in Gaza and the West Bank, and the sense of community expressed in public demonstrations that have brought people together in the name of human dignity were among the topics touched upon by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who was a guest on Wednesday, October 15, in the studios of Vatican Radio. The Cardinal spoke of a fragile truce, but also of the shared hope among Israelis and Palestinians that this is not just a “pause,” but rather that “life may resume with a new perspective — one that is not war and violence.”

You are in Rome to receive an award — the Achille Silvestrini Prize — which today will be presented to Father Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of the Holy Family Parish in Gaza. What is the situation of the Christians in that community who have decided to remain in such a difficult situation?

We are in daily contact with them. They keep writing that they still cannot believe they were able to sleep through the night without hearing the sound of bombs. There are still drones, but they have been used to that for years. Otherwise, the situation remains very fluid. As is known, there have been clashes among various factions, but all this was predictable because of the suspension of the war — we still do not know if it has truly ended — and the following stages are still quite uncertain, unclear, and ambiguous. Everything needs to be rebuilt, to be organized, and it was — and still is — predictable that there would be ups and downs. There is still much to do. The situation remains dramatic because everything is destroyed. People are returning, but they are returning to the ruins. Hospitals are not functioning; schools do not exist. There is still the matter of the bodies of the deceased Israeli hostages that must be recovered. This is not simple, since in the chaos that has taken place, the locations of these bodies have often been lost. The mistrust between the parties remains high. However, despite all this, there is a new atmosphere — still fragile, but we hope it will become more stable.

How is it possible, in this historical and emotional context, to build hope and fraternity?

First of all, it takes time. We must not confuse hope with a solution to the conflict, which is not mediated. The end of the war is not the beginning of peace, nor is it the end of the conflict. All of these aspects must be kept in mind. Still, it is naturally the first step. Hope, as I always say, is the daughter of faith. If your heart trusts, it can make real the things it believes in. So, we must work first of all on this — with those who still want to engage again — to create this network, both within Gaza and outside it, because we must not separate the two sides of the borders. We must build fraternity. I believe there is a need for new political leadership, but also religious leadership. This is very important, and we have already begun to make contact. We need new faces, new figures who can help rebuild a different narrative, one based on mutual respect. It will take a long time,

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because the wounds are deep, but we must not give up. Therefore, there is still hope of building lasting peace, even though right now we are only at the first steps. We must first of all believe in it — we must want it. The timeline will be long; we should not fool ourselves into thinking it will come soon. We must also keep in mind the failures of past agreements — the many failures that have deeply undermined trust between the parties. There will be several phases. I think perhaps the next generation will have a freedom that this generation does not have. But the task of this generation is to prepare the next one. So, little by little, we must create the foundations and conditions, with new faces and new leadership, and above all, create environments that gradually foster a culture of respect, which will in turn bring peace.

What are the concrete hopes of this generation, of the people you meet every day in Jerusalem or elsewhere?

At this moment, we are in a new and still fragile phase. We are coming out of two terrible years. The hope is that we have reached the end of those years — not just a temporary pause. This hope is shared by everyone, Israelis and Palestinians alike, right or left, from every background. Everyone wants to truly turn the page. That is the first thing. Of course, there are different opinions, both political and religious, and there are different perspectives. But there is also a strong desire among ordinary people to live again, not necessarily in normalcy, but with a new perspective that is not war and violence.

In recent days, we have heard dramatic testimonies about the conditions endured by hostages held by Hamas, who have now been freed. We have also heard accounts of the degradation suffered by Palestinian prisoners detained in Israeli jails. What can be said about this suffering, which in some way seems to cut across both sides? And about how to build a future that does not stem from hatred?

This has been one of the great tragedies of this time. You said “shared suffering,” but it was not perceived as such. Each side was enclosed within its own pain, seeing only its own suffering, its own people’s perspective. As others have also said, everyone was so full of their own pain that they had no room left inside to make space for the pain of others. Now that this situation has ended, perhaps we can gradually begin to open ourselves to understanding the pain of the other. To understand does not mean to justify. This will take time — and I don’t know if it will fully succeed. The hatred that has been sown — not only in these last two years, when it exploded, but also long before, through a narrative of contempt, rejection, and exclusion — demands a new language, new words, and also new witnesses. You cannot separate what is said from who says it. So, I repeat: we need new faces who can help us think differently.

What is the situation in the West Bank — in parishes and small villages such as Taybeh, Zababdeh, or Aboud? And what is the role of Christians and Catholics, including Hebrew-speaking Catholics who are fully integrated into Israeli society?

These are two very different situations. In the West Bank, the general situation — not only that of our Catholic Christian parishes — is very fragile and continually deteriorating. The village communities you mentioned are increasingly isolated from one another. There are hundreds of checkpoints regulating internal movements, making the situation more and more difficult. As I have said several times, it has become a kind of “no law land,” meaning “a territory without law,” because there are many attacks and tensions, including with settlers, which seem, if anything, to be tolerated rather than stopped. There is no authority to appeal to in order to stop these situations. This creates major tensions and great insecurity within our parishes and communities. In the West Bank, the situation remains very fragile — not only politically, but also economically. The two main resources — commuting to Israel for work and pilgrimages — are both suspended right now, and we don’t know when or how they will resume. This has a strong impact on people’s lives, especially on Christians. The Hebrew-speaking Catholic community is composed of small

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groups of a few hundred people, who have also welcomed several hundred children of migrants or foreign workers in Israel. I believe their role is especially important within the Church itself rather than outside it. In a certain sense, they force our diocese — which is very complex — to think broadly, not to focus only on the Palestinian question, but to remember that even within Israeli society there is pain, there are perspectives and visions that must be taken into account.

In recent weeks, we have seen mass mobilizations and demonstrations, including in Italy, where millions have taken to the streets. Beyond extremist groups and a few unacceptable slogans, there are young people showing they want to move beyond the logic of indifference…

Certainly, there have been excesses — of violence, but also of language, including against Judaism. That is unacceptable. There were statements that could, in some way, justify antisemitism — something we reject totally and completely. That must be said clearly. But we cannot generalize and say they were all like that: there were many people — not only young people — who took part. What struck me was the diversity: thousands of people from different backgrounds, generations, and even political affiliations were united in saying “no” to the images of violence they had seen. This, to me, is a positive aspect, because it has awakened a consciousness — not only personal but communal. They were united; in that unity, community was formed. I think this is very important — to form community and unity around something beautiful, such as the dignity of the human person and the rejection of violence — red lines that must not be crossed, even in the name of defense. This was a beautiful and positive aspect. Let us hope it continues. I think it is an important awakening, also for various religious and political leaders, to realize that within the conscience of the community there is something good that must be protected — and perhaps find expression even beyond this context of war.

Turning again to the Holy Land, do you expect the return of pilgrims?

We hope so. I spoke with the Custos of the Holy Land about doing something together, perhaps issuing some statements. We’ll wait two or three weeks to see how things evolve. Then I think we will need to start “hammering away,” so to speak, especially among the Churches that have been very close to the Holy Land over these past two years, to say that now it’s time to show solidarity not only through prayer, which is essential, and through aid, but also through pilgrimage.

This year marks 30 years since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, a man of peace. How important is it to have new leaders who are willing to commit themselves to peace? Do you see any positive signs in this regard?

I believe it is one of the decisive aspects. I have said it many times and will repeat it again here: we need new leaders who speak a different language from what we have heard in recent years — not only political leaders but also religious ones. Thirty years ago, Rabin was saying one thing, and religious leaders were saying another. Now it is necessary to change; we must become aware of this. In this context, interreligious dialogue is very important. I believe that interreligious dialogue also needs new faces, and it cannot ignore what has happened — what has wounded us all. We need to take into account what has been said, and what has not been said — not to stop there, but to move forward, because we have become aware of it. We must go beyond it, remembering what has happened, without being naïve. The difficulties are many, but we have a duty toward our communities — to help them look beyond, positively and serenely, toward a different future.

What do you think of the international debate about the recognition of the State of Palestine?

The Palestinians do not only need the war and the violence to end, nor do they need only to be helped and supported economically. They also need to be recognized in their dignity as a people. I

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do not know if the “two peoples, two states” solution, so often affirmed, is achievable in the short term. I will not enter into these political questions. But one cannot tell the Palestinians that they have no right to be recognized as a people in their own land. There have been declarations — often only theoretical — that must find concrete realization within the context of dialogue between the parties, which they themselves will have to reach, with the help and support of the international community.

Have you felt the closeness of the Pope during this time?

We have felt the closeness of Pope Leo. We had already felt the closeness of Pope Francis before, and then also of Pope Leo. They have different personalities, but both expressed their closeness in very concrete ways — through phone calls, through frequent contact with the parish priest of Gaza — even though these things do not make the news. And that’s fine: it’s important, because you must do good for its own sake, not for publicity. This closeness has also been expressed in very tangible ways, through concrete aid. The latest gesture we received, just a couple of days ago, was the Pope’s wish to send thousands of antibiotics into the Gaza Strip.

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