

From March 9-15, the Holy Land Commission conducted their 2025 Spring visit concentrating on the West Bank and Palestine. The commission was joined by the Lieutenant of Switzerland, Donata Krethlow-Benziger and Francois Vayne, Communications Director for the Grand Magisterium in Rome.

We had a full schedule with meetings at the Latin Patriarchate offices with the department managers, visits in the Old City of Jerusalem to humanitarian aid recipients, trips to Bethlehem University and the LPJ Seminary in Beit Jala, 2 school and parish visits, a visit to the new youth and family center in Haifa, and a Zoom call with Fr Gabrielle in Gaza.

Gaza

In our Zoom call, Fr Gabrielle shared that the last few weeks have been incredibly stressful. After a few months of relative calm, electricity has been disabled again. The parish is back to relying on its generators for a few hours a day to run the well pumps and charge up cell phones. Supply trucks are not making it through the check points and food supplies are becoming scarce. He commented that it feels like resource starvation is the new plan to convince everyone to move out of Gaza. Nevertheless, the ~450 people still living at the parish are resolute and committed to staying in their homeland.

Even with these challenges, there are rays of hope. The Holy Family Parish parents insisted that somehow, somehow, the parish restart schooling for the children. Under the guidance of 5 teachers, a few sisters and the help of some parents, ~120 kids aged 3-16, are currently having classes a few hours each day in whatever space they can find. Since the parish fully expects that the school building will continue to be used as family housing for the next several years, a solution for classroom space needed to be found. The LPJ is working with the Rosary Sisters to refurbish a nearby school that the sisters are no longer using. This plan will give the teachers functional rooms with desks, a few computers and even some basic science lab equipment.

Unfortunately, Father had to cut our visit a little short. He received word that Pope Francis would be calling soon. Pope Francis still calls him almost every day to encourage the parishioners and pray with him.

West Bank

The situation in the West Bank is worse today than in our last visit in March 2024. The staff commented that for decades they have dealt with conflict flare ups but they have all quickly dissipated. Not this time; the current war stands at 18 months and counting by far the longest conflict ever. With tourism shutdown for all practical purposes, unemployment among Christians is estimated at 65%. The LPJ staff estimates that 85% of the tourism industry is owned, operated or staffed by Christians.

Security measures have radically increased around the West Bank. 190 new barriers/check points were installed within days after war began. This has severely restricted travel and

isolates villages from each other.

If this were not bad enough, inflation is now close to 6% and the value of the Shekel continues to drop against the Dollar and Euro. With everything now more expensive, family finances are severely strained.

In the Old City, the shops are still mostly closed and the streets remain empty. The locals have abandoned hopes for Easter pilgrimages and are now praying for some pilgrims to return this summer and fall.

LPJ Seminary in Beit Jala

We had an opportunity to visit the LPJ seminary in Beit Jala. Currently 9 seminarians are enrolled – 2 in their entry year and 7 in advanced studies. We joined them for lunch and discovered they are a very enthusiastic group!

The call to the priesthood is being well received in Jordan, but Visa issues prevent many young men from crossing the board to enter the Beit Jala seminary. This fall, 2 Jordanian seminarians had a 6-8 week delay in returning to the seminary from their summer break at home. Uncertain about the future for Visas, the seminary is considering a very small, satellite seminary program in Jordan to at least cultivate the interest of Jordanian young men in the priesthood.

You may recall that the Beit Jala Minor Seminary had to be closed because of a change in Israeli law prohibiting youth under the age of 18 from living in a congregate setting. We learned that the Armenian Catholic church was able to obtain an exemption from this law and have restarted their minor seminary. The LPJ is applying for a similar exemption.

In place of the minor seminary, recruiting efforts have been stepped up to encourage vocations. A series of discernment weekends for middle and high school boys are being held at parishes all over the region. The response is very good, giving the seminary a growing list of potential candidates.

The lay community education and spiritual formation classes continue to grow. We will provide more information on those efforts in a future Holy Land update.

Bethlehem University

Unfortunately, scheduling and travel issues provided us with a very limited time to visit Bethlehem University. Meeting with the senior staff, we received an update on the recently completed Strategic Plan and were thrilled to hear the announcement of new building – The Hamad Al Harazeen Facility of Applied Sciences, Technology, and Engineering – that will house undergraduate classes and the university's new Master's in Engineering program.

We were blessed to hear 3 students share their personal experiences. Each detailed their daily

struggles, including movement restrictions and financial hardships. Despite these obstacles, they continue their pursuit of academic excellence.

Mr. Moussa Rabadi, Director of the Institute for Community Engagement and Partnerships, introduced the AFAQ program, a joint venture between the LPJ and Bethlehem University that a groundbreaking initiative supported by EOHSJ funding. This program focuses on:

Vocational training & skill development,
Community empowerment through education, and
Career readiness & employment opportunities

50+ people have already benefited from this program with a huge waiting list of hopeful participants awaiting funding.

Ain Arik Parish and School

Ain Arik is the last Christian school West of Ramallah. After Covid, school enrollment was so low and the finances so dire, that the school was set to be closed. When this was announced, Muslim parents in the area were very upset feeling that their children were being "thrown into the streets". They knew Christian children could be bused to another LPJ school, but not theirs. They didn't want their children to be forced to enroll in the fundamentalist Islamic school nearby.

They called a town meeting, requested an audience with the Patriarch and convinced him to keep the school open. They promised to fill it with children and cover all expenses.

Today, this school is thriving. There are 300 students, 250 Muslim and 50 Christian. There are 2 sections at all most every grade level with a need for 3 more classrooms to accommodate all those interested. They are looking at dividing the parish social hall to make that happen. Every space is being used. The parish priest has a kindergarten classroom just outside his bedroom!

A revived school has been a boon to the Christian families. They are being employed by the school in many roles. Christian values are being shared with the next generation of young people of all religions. The entire Neighborhood saved the school!

The school building needs many repairs and updates. Another example of why the successful the Ensure the Future of the Latin Patriarchate Schools Capital Campaign is so important.

LPJ Schools in Israel (Galilee)

We rarely talk about the 6 LPJ schools located in Israel. The schools have historically been well funded by educational subsidies from the Israeli government. The war is changing all this. With a weakening economy and tremendous war expenses, Israel has cut its school subsidy, resulting in the LPJ Israeli schools having their first ever budget deficit for the 2023-24 school

year. The trend is expected to not only continue, but get worse, as further subsidy cuts are anticipated.

In another first, the Israeli LPJ schools are experiencing problems collecting tuition. Some parents are simply no longer able to pay.

To help finance the mounting Israeli government budget deficit, Israel is considering eliminating the exemption on churches and schools from municipal taxes. If this happens, all the LPJ schools within Israel will incur tens of thousands of dollars in unbudgeted taxation expenses.

Still, there are bright spots. We visited a classroom where students used computer aided design to learn how to create simple circuit boards. Technology and technology job training is a very important initiative in the LPJ schools. Advancing these skills is seen as a critical path for meeting current employment needs and lessening young people's dependence on the tourism industry.

Social Services and Humanitarian Aid

The LPJ social service office now receives 175-200 requests per month for tuition assistance, food coupons, medical expenses, rent and other essential needs; an increase of over 300% from the start of the war! The "new poor" - those previously self-sufficient but are no longer – are driving the increase in aid requests. This is especially pronounced among young adults who are experiencing the highest level of unemployment. Inflation is making things difficult for everyone.

LPJ continues to be the ONLY source for social services for Christians. The LPJ spent \$1.6 million dollars in 2024 on humanitarian aid – far higher than its \$1 million dollar budget. Some of that deficit was covered by donations from worldwide Catholic Relief agencies helping because of the war. But that support is dwindling. With an expected 2-year economic recovery period anticipated once the war is finally over, the LPJ is bracing for several years of heightened humanitarian need.

In one of our aid recipient visits, we met a lovely couple with 4 children who have been married for 19 years. The family owns their home in the Muslim Quarter of the old City, inherited from his grandfather. There are 3 very small rooms, and only 2 windows in the home. The living room/dining area is converted into a bedroom for the boys and parents at night. The two daughters share a tiny bedroom. There is a wet room that serves as a bathroom everyone. The Kitchen is in the hallway. The roof leaks causing the house to have mold issues. They have been on a wait list for 14 years to get a larger home.

The father was educated as a teacher and is now working with the Franciscans as a handyman/custodian. The mother is a laid off hotel worker, who hopes to find a job as soon as tourism starts up again.

The father took a loan out to purchase a computer for the kids to do school online when they cannot go in person. They have one iPad which was left to them by a deceased aunt and the kids do their homework on their cell phones.

They have many needs but are extremely shy about asking for help. As we leave, the mother says timidly, "please don't forget us!"

Youth and Family Center in Haifa

A new Youth and Family Center in Haifa opened March 2024. It was one of Cardinal Pizzaballa's first initiatives as Patriarch - to find a place, renovate it and staff such a center in the Galilee region where no services existed. It has had its share of start-up challenges. The Haifa region has intermittently received missile attacks from Hezbollah conflicts and a missile shell fell in the courtyard creating a crater, but miraculously not damaging anything!

The Family Center is focused on marriage preparation, family therapy, individual counseling, and spiritual formation. It offers retreats, lectures, and individual and small groups sessions. Their key goal in the coming months to start an outreach program to the regional parishes to make people aware these programs are now available.

The mission of the Youth Center is to support the knowledge and skill development of the all the youth throughout the Galilee region. They do this by organizing meetings, activities, and spiritual retreats, promoting positive Christian values in all that it does. We found Fr. Ramez Twal, the Youth Center Director, to be a very dynamic, charismatic person. Fr Twal is reaching his audience quickly has numbers have grown from the few, to the hundreds, of youth being served each month.

Closing

It is hard for us to truly express to you how much the priests, teachers, staff, parents and students appreciate the generous donations our members make each and every year. We are always greeted warmly and thanked profusely. We cannot repeat it enough: Thank you and thanks to you. Your support truly does make a difference in the lives of Christians in the Holy Land.