

INTERVIEW / FATHER HADDAD

In Bethlehem there is a Catholic school preparing for a better future

WORLD

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“October 7 made our mission to educate for a better future in our land much more difficult. And we had no idea what might happen next. It was very challenging to find the best way to go on in a situation that is constantly getting worse. Our students began to

ask us lots of questions about the war and it is our responsibility to give them the hope to carry on.”

The *Daily Compass* phoned Father George Haddad OFM, director of Terra Sancta School in Bethlehem, to ask him about the particular challenges this tragic period presents for the youth in the Holy Land. He speaks proudly about his school with its impressive history. Founded in 1598 by the Franciscan Order, it is the oldest school in the Middle East. “We believe education is the key to a better future in the Holy Land. Our school strives for excellence so our students can one day claim their right to live here and make this land a safer more just place to live”, he says.

The Terra Sancta School in Bethlehem is run by the Order of Franciscan Minors. It is a mixed school which provides for 1,233 Palestinian students from the ages of 3-18 from all Christian confessions including Muslims. It teaches Arabic, English and Italian and it’s curriculum is constantly being revised to keep up with new developments in education to enable its students to leave with the best skills and qualifications to “face the world”.

Father George, what is the novelty of a school run by the Franciscan Order as opposed to a State school in Bethlehem?

Obviously, high standards in education is our priority. But we also give considerable importance to human values. Our school is a testimony of peaceful coexistence. Our students learn what it means to accept, understand and respect differences. They acquire everything they need to go into the world as responsible adults.

Yesterday marked the first anniversary of the start of the war between Hamas and Israel, how did the last year challenge the school?

The last academic year was very challenging for all of us, we are in the middle of a war. It is impossible not to be touched by the suffering around us. The tension affected our students and their families very deeply. Some are too young to understand what is happening. Others do not know the history. We have had to talk about the war and explain the reason for our presence in the Holy Land. We have to give them reasons to resist and believe change for the better is possible. We tell them if they take their education seriously and obtain the best grades and skills they can indeed make this country a better place for the next generation. They are constantly asking questions about the situation and are aware they are not free like students in other countries.

What kinds of questions do the students ask?

The most frequent question is why can’t they go to pray at the Holy Sepulchre. They are

Christians and see that foreigners from America or Italy can travel freely to all the important Christian sites and instead they cannot go. Justice is missing here and they are thirsty for justice. Then they ask why there is so much hatred. We tell them, God is always close to mankind but mankind is not close to God. When man doesn't listen to God his heart becomes a heart of stone and the result is war. We must turn back to God. [Saint Francis's prayer make me a channel of your peace](#) explains it very well.

So how do you cultivate their hope?

We tell them that they hold the future in their hands. They have to persevere, study, take care of themselves. We do not deny there are many political and economic problems to overcome. But, if God elected them to be born here in this Holy Land, in this specific period of time, then He has a great mission for them to complete here and that is their responsibility.

How do your students respond to this provocation?

Most would like to stay and work in their homeland if they could but there are not enough jobs and opportunities. Our students are well educated so some emigrate to find work abroad. Again, it's a problem of justice. Palestinians deserve the same opportunities the youth have in other countries in the world, to work and a decent living standard. But we want our youth to live here and our mission is to help our youth stay in the Holy Land. It is their right to stay and live here, to feel safe.

When Iran attacked Israel some missiles reached Jerusalem. Did the school have to take precautionary measures to guarantee the safety of their students?

Even if the school is in a safe area near the Basilica of the Annunciation we have to take precautions. We have private security guards and the local authorities keep us informed on problems in the area. There are tensions near the basilica from time to time. When that happens we tell our students to stay home or come to school later. If there are problems after the day has started, we keep them in school until it's safe for their families to collect them.

How did the school respond to Pizzaballa's appeal?

It was an important day for our school. We held an assembly with speeches on peace and justice. We prayed altogether. We went to the parish church to take part in the hour of adoration and prayers. We prayed for peace in man's heart, peace in our land, peace in the world. Everyone needs peace.

What message do you have for people around the world?

Pray for us, that God can speak to the hearts of all men so that justice and peace prevails in the Holy Land and that the rights of Palestinians to live here is recognised.

God became man in this land for the whole world. The story of the Holy Land is not only our story, it is everyone's story. The story of every Christian. For us to love our land is to love Jesus. Pray that we may continue to love Him freely in our land.