

INTERVIEW/FATHER FALTAS

War in Gaza puts 'Christian presence in Middle East in danger of disappearing'

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Elisa Gestri



In a recent joint statement, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pizzaballa, and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Theophilos III, declared that the priests and nuns of both Churches will remain in Gaza alongside the population devastated by hunger and war,

even in the face of a probable Israeli operation of 'forced displacement' or 'evacuation.'

The words of the two prelates follow threats by Israeli Defence Minister Katz to "raze Gaza to the ground" if Hamas does not accept Israel's conditions by releasing all hostages.

At the Rimini Meeting, the *Daily Compass* spoke about the serious situation in Gaza and the West Bank with Franciscan priest Father Ibrahim Faltas, former parish priest of Jerusalem and vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land, currently director of the schools of the Holy Land and Casa Nova in Jerusalem. At the Meeting, Father Faltas participated in the presentation of the documentary film *Osama – in viaggio verso casa* (Osama – on his way home) produced by the association Pro terra Sancta.

Father Faltas, what is the international community doing to alleviate the suffering of the people in Gaza?

Nothing. Worse, the aid drops that several countries are making over Gaza are killing people and destroying their tents. But do you know how many people die every day while queuing for food? Killed by the air drops, I mean, as well as by Israeli attacks. No, the international community must intervene in another way. So far, there has only been silence, and no one has intervened.

We know that some seriously injured or sick Palestinian children have been welcomed in Italy...

Italy is the first European country that, since the beginning of the conflict, has welcomed three hundred people, including children in need of urgent care and their carers, and for this I must thank Minister Tajani. I went to meet the latest arrivals at Ciampino a few weeks ago: a six-month-old baby with an amputated leg, a girl who weighed thirty-five kilos and died two days later... Did you read the news?

Yes. Some say she died of a pre-existing illness and not of starvation.

They can say what they like! If a person weighs 35 kilos, what could be the cause of death? They can say what they like, but this is the reality. In Gaza, Mother Teresa's nuns have a home for disabled people. Before the conflict, there were eighty, now there are thirty left. Why do you think that is? Three hundred people have died of starvation in Gaza in the last month alone.

What is the fate of Palestinian Christians?

To leave. Christians are leaving the West Bank. Seven hundred people have left Bethlehem alone: if things continue like this, the Christian presence in the Middle East

will come to an end.

In his speech during the presentation of the documentary film, Father Faltas firmly reiterated his position:

"I live in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem," he said. 'And I speak to you not as an observer, but as a direct witness to what has been happening every day for too long. This is a land that I love deeply, but since 7 October it has once again become the scene of a tragedy that seems to have no end. Everything has changed, the rhythm of our days has changed. People's outlook has changed. Hope has changed. I speak to you from within an open wound. A wound that throbs in Jerusalem, in Gaza, in Bethlehem, in the West Bank...

A wound that affects everyone, without distinction. For almost two years, life has changed radically. And not only in Gaza. Even in our cities, in our villages, the heartbeat of the Holy Land has changed. We are all suffering. The Jews are suffering. The Muslims are suffering. We Christians are suffering. Because pain, hatred and revenge know no religion. They enter everyone's homes. They bring silence, fear, mourning. But if there is one voice that cries out louder than the rest, it is that of the children of Gaza. They are the ones who pay the highest price. I have seen with my own eyes children who are wounded, amputees, mutilated, with deep wounds in their bodies and souls, with very serious illnesses. Many do not speak. Many cannot smile. An entire generation has been scarred. A generation of children who know nothing but war, flight and hunger. Many have lost a leg, an arm or both. Many have lost their parents, many have lost their voices.

Today, for thousands of families, a tent is a home. Under the scorching August sun, with temperatures above 40 degrees, without electricity, without clean water, without sanitation. The sewers are destroyed, and diseases are spreading: infections, viruses, dehydration, especially among the youngest. Human dignity has been crushed. Gaza today is a wound carved into the living flesh of humanity. A wound that questions us, challenges us, condemns us if we choose to ignore it. In addition to the humanitarian catastrophe, monuments, works of art, and millennia-old testimonies to the history of Gaza have also been destroyed. It is as if someone wanted to erase the past, the memory, the very identity of a people. A common cultural heritage has been wiped out.

In the midst of all this are the Christians of Gaza. I often hear from them when they manage to answer the phone. I hear their voices trembling, the sound of bombs nearby. Even in recent days, some bombs have fallen near the parish, sowing new fear. Yet they remain there. They resist. For almost two years, more than six hundred people have

been living in the parish premises. The parish priest, Don Gabriel, and Father Joseph live with them: the parish has become a living testimony to a gospel that is embodied in pain and solidarity.

Meanwhile, the West Bank is also bleeding. In the last two years, 180 Christian families have emigrated. Bethlehem is emptying. What will become of the future of Christians in the Holy Land? Who will remain to guard those places if there are no longer families, schools, young people? And so I feel the need to cry out for truth and peace. We are not facing a conflict between religions. It is not a war of faiths. It is a human tragedy, a massacre. And as human beings, we cannot remain indifferent."