

VOCATIONS IN THE LAND OF JESUS

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Beit Jala is a large village, almost a town, sitting on a hill to the west of Bethlehem and some nine kilometres from Jerusalem. It offers the best view there is of the birthplace of Jesus. Bethlehem has about 40,000 inhabitants and is growing rapidly. Its population is becoming increasingly Moslem, even though the percentage of Christians of various denominations remains high. Its numerous bell towers reflect the presence of Christian churches, schools and religious communities.

To the left of the road which comes from Bethlehem, there is a large building with a very fine panoramic view. This is the Patriarchal Seminary, attended by aspirants to the priesthood from Palestine, Israel and Jordan. The junior and the senior seminary are next to each other and are part of the same complex. The seminary church serves also as the parish church.

My meeting with Fr Marun, the Rector, took place in the senior seminary, where he very kindly agreed to speak to me about «Vocations in the land of Jesus».

– Do you think that the number of priests and religious in the Holy Land and the work they do respond adequately to the needs of the population?

As far as numbers are concerned, they are more than adequate. Given the number of priests and men women religious living in the diocese, we are really spoilt. There is, however, the handicap of language. As a result, 90% of religious are unable to respond fully to the needs of the population. It is a paradoxical situation. Despite the great number of men and women religious living in the Holy Land, when we need people to hear confessions, give talks and homilies, help with parish missions, there is no one able to do so because of language problems.

– Are you satisfied with the number and quality of the young people in formation in the seminaries and religious houses?

Well, the Rector of a seminary cannot say he is not satisfied, otherwise he would have to say «*mea culpa*». We are certainly satisfied as regards numbers, because if we consider the total number of Catholics in the Holy Land, we have to admit that the number of aspirants that we have in the diocesan seminary as well as in the Franciscan seminary represents an excellent percentage. The Beterram Fathers have candidates in formation and the Sisters also have a good number. The Sisters who have the most are the Rosary Sisters, the Sisters of St Joseph, the Dorothea Sisters and the Sisters of St Anne. The Lord has certainly been generous in providing vocations in the Holy Land.

As regards the quality, one would have to ask someone who does not live in a seminary. The families of our aspirants are very religious, and so there is a whole area of basic formation that has already been done at home. Our main task is to accustom them to a disciplined life. In Arab families there is not much discipline. The young people who come to us reflect quite naturally their Arab background, in which there is a certain amount of conflict. We have to give them guidelines regarding discipline.

Another problem arising from their social background involves language. Formation in the seminary is given in French. To learn French well in a setting which is not in the least French-speaking demands a lot of hard work. There is the fact also that our candi-

dates come from Palestine, Jordan and Israel (in particular, Galilee). One major problem is obtaining passes, visas, documents. The mentality of the candidates is not uniform. This is a cross we have to bear daily. The situation is becoming more and more complicated.

– What is done to obtain new vocations?

We have a vocations team, and we have divided up their recruitment area into 3 parts: the first is Jordan, which is a very fertile area for vocations; the second is this area (Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah); and the third is the north part of Palestine (Samaria, Genin, Nablus, Rafidia, Israel). Parishes are visited three times a year, but we concentrate especially on parish schools. A member of the team visits all the parish schools and also all the non-parish Christian schools, such as the Brothers' schools in Amman, Jerusalem and Bethlehem; the Terrasanta schools run by the Franciscans; the Sisters' schools. There he speaks to the classes which might be interested in vocations. We need to bear in mind that we run a junior seminary with classes for children between the ages of 12 and 16 (grades 7, 8 and 9). It is especially in these classes that we find candidates. We do so, of course, with the help of the chaplain or the parish priest or, more especially, of the assistant priest who has more contact with the young people. There are three stages in the process. In the first, the idea of a vocation is broached, names are collected, and from these candidates will be selected later. The parish priest is involved in this first stage which takes place in October/November. The second stage takes place in February, and the third after Easter, during which the names of those who can be accepted are finally chosen.

Every year, about thirty young men of all ages join the seminary. Most of them are 14 or 15 years of age, but especially more recently, a certain number enter the senior seminary directly, that is, here. The work is relatively easy, as the parish structures make everything function more smoothly. There are some parishes that send candidates to the seminary every year. Even if some years there are none, everyone knows that almost every year there are young people who go to the seminary.

– On the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations what special activities have you organised?

We have not organised anything in particular because we have already a well-organised series of activities. After Easter, there is always an open day at the seminary for future candidates and their families. This year it will be attended by all the candidates of the region, with the exception of those from Jordan, because of travel difficulties. As a consequence we have to divide up the group. Every year there are ten or so candidates from Palestine, who are invited to spend the day at the seminary with their families. There is a special Mass, lunch, celebrations including a tour of the seminary. In this way, everyone sees the place, the facilities, how candidates live, study, eat. Seeing all this helps people.

– What are the best kinds of environment for the growth of vocations: Christian schools, parishes, pastoral centres, summer camps...?

There is absolutely no doubt: the best are the parish and the Christian schools. We have never had a shortage of vocations because we have always had parish and religious schools. It is enough to go around a few schools to find vocations. I do not say this is automatic, but it is easy.

We run summer camps also. These camps are attended by members of youth movements. Every year we have one or two young persons who come to the seminary from a Catholic Action group, from the Young Christian Students movement (JEC), and so on. All these youth movements run summer camps for youth leaders and formation.

– What is the attitude of the Moslems towards Catholic priests and religious?

Some distinctions have to be made. There are areas where Moslems know what priests are, and what men and women religious are. These Moslems have lived in contact with Christians in such places as Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah and in towns and villages where there is a Christian presence. In these places, reli-

gious and priests are held in high esteem. There are other areas where Moslems know that Christians exist but they are not in contact with them. This is the case, for example, in Hebron, Genin, Nablus, Tulkarem and Gaza. These are towns and villages where the Christian presence is minimal. In these places they know we are priests or religious, similar to their own sheiks, a man of God. In these places the same esteem probably does not exist, but there is still respect for the religious habit and for the role. Priests and religious always command respect in the East.

– What is the most common attitude among Jews towards our priests and religious?

I really do not know. I have very little contact with them. Our contacts are mostly with the military. They stop us constantly, so our contact with them is not very friendly. We have no contact with Israeli society. I do not know what they think of us. I think they have a strange idea of us.

– Is consecrated celibacy valued by Jews and Moslems?

By the Jews, I do not know, but by Moslems, I do not think so. It is not properly understood. They find it difficult to accept. For Moslems, marriage constitutes half of their religion. They certainly prefer a married priest. They can understand it only as a matter of faith. If you speak of consecration, it is not understood. If you speak of freedom of action, it is not understood either. If you speak of sacrifice, it has no effect. If you say it is for God, well, that is acceptable, because God is a mystery. What is certain is that this is one of the points on which there is very little common ground.

– Are there many priests and religious from other countries who come to work in the Holy Land? What kind of work do they normally undertake?

They are certainly numerous and they serve the local community in a variety of ways. Their contribution is immense morally, culturally, intellectually and liturgically. All those religious houses, pastoral centres, study centres, universities are of great value. If there is a Palestinian elite, it is due to the leadership and training they have provided. The great task of providing education begun last century continues. That is certain. Unfortunately, the great stumbling block is language. Religious would be a hundred percent more effective if they knew Arabic. All the same, Jerusalem would be enormously impoverished if the men and women religious, who have a real love for the Holy Land, were to withdraw from the city. Their contribution to Jerusalem is invaluable.

– What is the formation programme in this seminary?

There is the junior seminary and the senior seminary. The junior seminary programme lasts 5 years. Candidates arrive after year 7 (in Italy, second year of the Middle School), that is, at the age of 13-14, and stay there for 5 years. It is a school with all the study programmes usual in our country. One difference is a greater stress on the study of French, and in the last two years, the study of basic Latin. It is obviously a boarding school which offers a greater degree of follow-up. Our seminary is of the old style. In their final two years, the seminarians are sent to the parish school which is across the road. In this school they do years 11 and 12 of their schooling. It is the parish school, that is, a Catholic school.

The reasons for this arrangement are the following. First of all, there are only a few candidates of this age and this arrangement saves us money. Secondly, the parish school offers a choice of science and arts subjects. This is a luxury the seminary could not afford to provide for 5 or 6 young men. Thirdly, and this is for them an excellent experience, our seminarians can mix with boys and girls of their own age. This provides a better balance for their affective lives. We have had this arrangement for two years now and it has proved positive. Our young men feel very much at their ease.

When they take their Taujihi (school leaving exam), they go on to the senior seminary. This stage of their training begins with a year which concentrates on spirituality. It is called the propaedeutic

year. This is a preparatory year because there is a great difference between the junior and the senior seminary. Whoever enters the senior seminary needs to have made a basic commitment. During this year, there is great insistence on the Bible, prayer, spiritual life, recollection, the Church's teaching, the Divine Office. It is a kind of novitiate.

After the propaedeutic year, the seminarians are sent to France for a year. Even if they have studied French for a number of years, they are not ready to tackle the study of philosophy in French on the basis of what they have learned. To study Aristotle in French they need something more than the colloquial French they picked up in the seminary. They need a good knowledge of the language. We send them to seminaries or religious communities, or to parishes we know well. The seminarians stay a whole year in France. When they return to us they do two years of philosophy leading up to a mini-thesis on some aspect of the subject. Next they have 4 years of theology, followed by a year of practical experience in a parish, after which they are ordained. This happens when they are 25 or 26 years of age.

– What are the main means you use to stimulate the spiritual life of the seminarians?

In the senior seminary we insist a lot on the liturgy, prayer and spiritual direction. Each seminarian has his own spiritual director who ideally should be his confessor also. The superior cannot be their confessor. Spiritual direction is considered very important. Great stress is laid on personal and community prayer. The greatest care possible is taken over the liturgy. This spiritual formation is closely linked with pastoral training. The seminarians are involved in pastoral work, going to parishes every Saturday and Sunday. There they come into contact with young people and with the altar servers. They teach catechism, run meetings, sing in the choir, do the readings. They are supervised by the parish priest of the church they go to, but their pastoral theology teacher also follows them up, visiting the parishes once or twice a year to see how they do their work. During the summer, they spend a month doing pastoral work in the parishes. In this way, their spiritual life goes hand in hand with their pastoral life.

– Are there any remarks or suggestions you would like to add regarding the pastoral ministry of vocations?

Well, I think more thought ought to be given to religious vocations. For example, there are no Trappist vocations in the diocese and yet there is a Trappist monastery. The Carmelites have some vocations but not many. The Sisters do more to find vocations: they go to the parishes and establish contact. One could say that religious are less zealous regarding this question. Franciscans get vocations because they have parishes. Other religious are less well known and have less contact with people. I have to say that two thirds of our candidates come from Jordan where generally people come into contact only with the priests of the Patriarchate, that is, with the secular clergy. When a person thinks of becoming a priest, he thinks in terms of a priest working in a parish.

The Betarram Fathers have some vocations in Jordan because families there know them. They do not understand very well what it means to be a religious. The Betarramite, on the other hand, is an «abuna», like the secular clergy, says Mass...and therefore is all right. The point of reference is the parish priest. In Palestine there are many religious, and people know there are Salesians there, as well as Dominicans, Jesuits, Brothers of the Christian Schools, and so on, and that they are all different. And yet, congregations have few vocations. The work done by religious is highly valued, but they do not have pastoral contact. Religious may be in contact with French-speaking, English-speaking and Italian-speaking persons, but not with the ordinary people. Vocations do not normally come from the elite. There needs to be more involvement with the ordinary people.

At this point, our conversation ended. I started the car up and went down the hill of Beit Jala. In front of me Bethlehem was a mass of shining lightst, and the night was very clear and cold. I thought of Europe, Italy and our own vocations. There is perhaps something we can learn! •