

Dear Brother in the Episcopate,

Here I am to talk to you once again about the Holy Land.

I feel a strong sense of responsibility to address the Catholic Bishops of the world, in the name of the Holy Father, conveying the Church's appeal in response to the cry of those who are suffering so much.

As I write to you, our hearts are lifted by the ceasefire in effect. We know that it is fragile and that, by its very nature, it will not be enough on its own to solve the problems and extinguish the hatred in that area. But at least our eyes no longer see explosions, perpetuating the anguish of the irreparable.

We have witnessed tears, despair and destruction everywhere. Now our hope is that the defeat inflicted by death will not be its eternal victory. And our hope is renewed in seeing the Risen One, Jesus Christ our Lord, who in that very land revealed the wounds of His passion, alive.

Today we feel that the words addressed by the Holy Father to the Christians who live in the Holy Places were not a pious wish, but a possible hope: "you, brothers and sisters in Christ who dwell in the lands of which the Scriptures speak most often, are a small, defenceless flock, thirsting for peace. Thank you for what you are, thank you for wanting to remain in your lands, thank you for being able to pray and love despite everything. You are a seed loved by God. Just as a seed, apparently pressed down by the earth that covers it, is always able to find its way upwards, towards the light, in order to bear fruit and give life, do not let yourselves be engulfed by the darkness that surrounds you. Planted in your sacred lands, become sprouts of hope, because the light of faith leads you to testify to love amid words of hatred, to encounter amid growing confrontation, to unity amid increasing hostility" (*Letter to the Catholics of the Middle East*, 7 October 2024).

Immediately, our duty – and I use this term with both trepidation and determination – comes to mind: to run, as soon as concretely possible, to help life to be reborn. To you, Brother Bishop, and to all those whom you animate in your ministry, God's dramatic appeal is addressed: "'Son of man, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause spirit to enter you, and you shall live'" (*Ezek. 37:3-5*). Everyone, starting with children, has the right to live in peace and to have homes and schools again, to play together without the fear of seeing the satanic grin of death again. It is true. For us Christians, the Holy Places have a special value; they are the incarnation of the

Incarnation. From the very beginning, Christian communities of diverse traditions have safeguarded them and, for centuries, the Friars Minor of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land have cared for them with admirable fidelity.

Initiatives of great pastoral value have sprung up around those places: parishes, schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, and assistance centres for migrants, displaced persons and refugees. Precisely to help support all this, Pope Saint Paul VI instituted the Collection for the Holy Places, repeated annually on Good Friday or on another locally established date.

This year the Collection becomes an essential resource: after the pandemic, with the almost complete interruption of pilgrimages and the small economic activities that Christians in particular have created alongside them, many have been forced into exile. If we want to strengthen the Holy Land and ensure living contact with the Holy Places, we must sustain Christian communities that, in their various traditions, offer perennial praise to the God-with-us, also in our name. For this to happen, we absolutely need the generous support of your communities.

I would like you, Brother Bishops, to become persuasive apostles of this commitment, remembering the images of destruction and death that have passed before our eyes in these times of new Calvary. The Holy Land, the Holy Places, the Holy People of God are your family, because they are the heritage of all of us. I implore you to feel the Collection as one of your pastoral priorities: at stake is the survival of this precious presence of ours, which dates back directly to the time of Jesus. I am certain that you will transmitted your enthusiasm and your affectionate care to the communities entrusted to you.

Pope Francis sends all of you his Blessing: God will not forget, especially in this Jubilee Year of Hope, those who have become witnesses of His Providence and instruments of His Peace. Our Christians of the Holy Land await you. Thank you and have a good Jubilee pilgrimage.

Claudio Card. Gugerotti

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