



New York Encounter: Seeking Peace in the Holy Land

The Holy Land is on everyone's mind at the moment, including at the 16th edition of the New York Encounter. It was given a central place, presenting the Christian perspective on the conflict, and looking for signs of hope in the darkness of the war.

by Filippo De Grazia

Reports from the Middle East, particularly Gaza, are frequently in the news these days. These reports portray an increase in violence, and terms used to describe wars are part of the daily life of many living in the Middle East. This narrative speaks little of hope and very little of humanity.

To offer a different perspective, guests at the New York Encounter 2024, took the initiative. This event, held on February 16-18, is the major annual gathering organized by the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation. Those close to the conflict gave two different in-

terpretations of the rise in violence in the Middle East: the first geopolitical and the second inspired by a Christian view of reality.

■ A Torn Open Wound

The first conference, held on Saturday, February 17, and titled "A torn open wound," presented the issue from a purely geopolitical standpoint through the voices of two experts, Shadi Hamid and Jacob Siegel, representing the Arab and Israeli perspectives, respectively. The debate, mediated by Everett Price, a foreign policy advisor, successfully presented the delicate topic of the Gaza war to an audience with diverse sensitivities. Analyzing the conflict through this dual perspective allowed the specta-

tors to delve into the issue in a balanced manner. This meeting also served as a preparatory session for the conference the next day.

■ An Incurable Wound?

On Sunday, February 18, the discussion returned to the war in Gaza but using a different narrative approach. The conference was not structured as a direct confrontation between two opposing views but rather as a testimony from individuals close to the conflict, united by their love for a place they are accustomed to calling the "Holy Land."

Guests of this significant moment of reflection included journalist Alessandra Buzzetti, correspondent for the Italian Catholic



broadcaster TV2000 and resident in Jerusalem since 2019, and Fr. David Grenier, OFM, Commissary of the Holy Land for the United States. They were joined by video contributions from Father Gabriel Romanelli, Argentinian parish

priest of the Roman Catholic Holy Family church in Gaza, and Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

The uniqueness of this encounter begins with the title of this session, which poses a question:

Not one, but two conferences were dedicated to the Holy Land during this year's edition of the New York Encounter.

“An Incurable Wound?” This immediately suggests that the matter under consideration is an inquiry rather than a definitive statement. This question laid behind each intervention in this session because, at this moment, human answers and solutions are uncertain.

Journalist Alessandra Buzzetti spoke about life in Jerusalem, a city currently “silent and suspended,” with the Garden of Gethsemane as the place that best describes the desolation of her soul in these months. Her very personal account, often narrated with a trembling voice, vividly expressed all the suffering of daily life in the Holy City, where the lack of communication between the two warring peoples prevents them from seeing each other's suffering, generating an even deeper wound.

Next, Fr. David Grenier began by stating that if, especially as Christians, we give in to anger or hatred, we become ourselves victims of the conflict, since our God is Love and hatred pulls us away from Him. As Christians, we can choose to live through this time by remembering the three pillars of Lent: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

“Why do we have to take sides? It's not a football game. Let's fast from prejudices, let go of judgment because we're talking about human lives, all loved by God,” he said, emphasizing the need for Christians to be bridge builders. “The bridge would not stand and would collapse if we put all the weight on one side; we need to have weight on both sides if we

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want the bridge to be a passage between the two peoples.”

The lack of communication between Israelis and Palestinians is perfectly understandable, but nothing prevents us from letting them meet in our hearts and prayers: “We ask God to bring about what is best for them, praying with the awareness that He is still capable of miracles, which is exactly what the Holy Land needs today.”

Finally, the Commissary of the Holy Land couldn’t help but mention the Christians of the Holy Land, who suffer the indirect consequences of the conflict. Emphasizing the third pillar of Lent, almsgiving, Fr. David appealed to the generosity of the audience, recalling the devastating impact of the war on the economy of the region, largely dependent on religious tourism. The commitment of the Franciscans in the Holy Land is constant, such as paying employees part of their salaries despite serious financial sustainability problems and keeping schools open because today it is more important than ever to transmit to the younger generation the Christian values of peace, love and respect for others. Furthermore, continuing the restoration works in the Holy Shrines, even in these difficult times, is also essential to provide jobs and dignity to Palestinian Christians and allow them to put bread on the table through the sweat of their own brow. Fr. David concluded by inviting people to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, challenging fear and making recovery possible.

The New York Encounter is an annual event created in 2009 and organized by Communion and Liberation, a Catholic movement founded in 1954 by Italian priest Fr. Luigi Giussani. Now in its 16th year, the Encounter gathers thousands of persons of different backgrounds, origins and generations. It was born out of a desire to introduce a non-Catholic world to the kind of outlook that comes from faith on social issues, trying to identify what in the present time is enhancing or hindering the full development of the human person.

The video-contributions of Fr. Romanelli and Patriarch Pizzaballa

The gathering was also inspired by video messages from Father Gabriel Romanelli and Patriarch Pizzaballa. Father Romanelli spoke about Gaza before October 7, describing it as a “beautiful land of mission.” Forced to follow the fate of Gaza and its Christian community from Jerusalem, because he was stranded outside the Strip before the war, Father Gabriel recounted the most difficult days away from his parish. Among them, he mentioned the bombing of the nearby Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius, where some Christian families had sought refuge, and the killing of three women from the Catholic community by Israeli snipers. In his emotionally charged witness, there was also a piece of hopeful news: the celebration of the First Communion for eight children a few weeks earlier in the Church of the Holy Family.

After the moving message of Father Romanelli, the Patriarch of Jerusalem addressed the months-long human and spiritual ordeal by speaking about Christ on the

Cross: “The crucified Jesus speaks to us of loneliness, refusal, human failure, but also and above all of love and forgiveness. We Christians are called to hold all these elements together.”

Pizzaballa’s role as a shepherd and guide for the Catholics of the Holy Land has exposed him to criticism from both sides. According to the Cardinal, there is no contradiction: “Loving Palestinians does not mean hating Israelis, and vice versa. Loving is not a feeling but an attitude of telling the truth. The highest expression of love is indeed the truth; in these months as Patriarch, I have never spared myself from denouncing what needed to be denounced through public statements condemning what is happening in Gaza.”

Asked about conflict resolution, Pizzaballa reminded that just as “pain can open, pain can also close,” and suggested rereading the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth.” “The Earth,” he underlined, “and not Heaven”. Meekness of heart is therefore necessary. And finally, he exhorted, “Keep praying, because with prayer nothing is impossible.” ■