



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The vitality of the Church in the Holy Land through the words of the Patriarchal Vicars

At the beginning of July 2021, His Beatitude Patriarch Pizzaballa appointed Mgr. William Shomali to assist him in leading the Diocese of Jerusalem as Vicar General, replacing him in Jordan with Father Jamal Daibes, who becomes Patriarchal Vicar resident in Amman. In Israel, Father Rafic Nahra assumed the position of new Patriarchal Vicar in Nazareth. In addition, Archbishop Pizzaballa appointed the new officer of the Vicariate responsible for migrants Father Nikodemus Schnabel, a German Benedictine, while the chaplain of the Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew speaking Catholics is Father Piotr Zelazko, a Polish priest.

In March 2022, Father Daibes and Father Nahra were appointed Auxiliary Bishops.

Interview with Mgr. William Shomali, Vicar General of the Diocese of Jerusalem, Mgr. Jamal Daibes, Patriarchal Vicar in Jordan, and Mgr. Rafic Nahra, Patriarchal Vicar in Nazareth in Israel.

What is it that you, each of you, wants to give thanks for after these years of service? What do you keep in your heart now that this great mission is accomplished?



Mgr. William Shomali: I thank the Lord for the four and a half years of service I spent in Jordan. I was able to get to know the other part of the diocese better, which has the majority of our faithful of the Latin rite. I remember full churches, especially on Sunday and Saturday evenings. I treasure the memory of the beautiful choirs, especially of Tla el Ali, of Webdeh, of the school of Shmeisani, of

Sweifieh, of Zarka, of Madaba and of Jubeiha... I keep in my heart the image of the new parish church of Jubeiha, built with the help of the Knights and Dames of the Order of Holy Sepulchre, a church that can accommodate 1,000 people seated. It is the largest and most beautiful church in Jordan! Thank you to the Knights and Dames of the Order and to the Grand Magisterium. I will not forget the effective collaboration between our priests, our deacons and our acolytes, nor the warm farewell of the faithful and friends who came to the Vicariate before my departure to greet my successor, Father Jamal Daibes, and me.

I would like to thank the Lord who supported me, especially in the following initiatives. As soon as I arrived in Jordan, I learned of a big problem between two Christian tribes in the south. There were death threats, a spirit of revenge and diabolical divisions between them. Thanks to the Latin Vicariate of Amman and a group of priests from the Patriarchate who took the lead in reconciliation, this story ended well. I do not have time to go into detail here but would refer our readers to the Patriarchate website (<https://www.lpj.org/fr/posts/reconciliationhistorique-entre-deux-grandefamilleschretiennes-de-jordanie.html>).

Eight permanent deacons help the priests in various parishes. We felt the need to have acolytes to distribute communion during Sunday masses and, on the first Friday of the month, to the sick. Twenty-one candidates came forward. After a yearlong preparation, they received the ministry of lectors and acolytes. These acolytes, all married and active, are young, enthusiastic and give pleasure through their voluntary work.

In 2017, we were able to reactivate the Council of Heads of Churches in Jordan. Bishops and church representatives meet six times a year to discuss challenges facing Christians. Together we were able to deal with the pandemic, especially with regard to the opening and closing of prayer houses, work together on a catechism book that will be submitted to the government with a view to teaching it to all Christian students at private and public schools. We have also obtained from the government a piece of land, which will become a cemetery for Christians in the northern area of Amman....

Jordan has eleven million inhabitants less than 2% of whom are Christians. The others are Sunni Muslims. One of the forums for dialogue is the Royal Institute for Interreligious Dialogue, founded and chaired by Prince Hassan Bin Talal, uncle of the current king. According to tradition, the Latin bishop of Amman is the vice-president of the Institute. This is an opportunity to remember the support that the royal family gives to the Christian minority in Jordan. Many interreligious meetings have taken place between this royal Institute and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Dialogue is important in this period marked by Muslim radicalism and political Islam.

Because of the debts that stigmatised the American University of Madaba (AUM) during its construction and which the Patriarchate had to pay for by selling land, it was not much fun to suddenly become the President of the Board of Trustees ... I accepted out of pure duty. The help offered by lay people faithful to the Patriarchate has slowly borne fruit. The number of students has increased significantly, new programmes have been launched, the latest being a master's degree in risk management. A university residence for girls, built thanks to the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre, currently accommodates 70 students. We hope the university will flourish.



Mgr. Jamal Daibes: After ten years of service at the University of Bethlehem as Head of the Department of Religious Studies, and four years as Rector of the Seminary, I spent four years as pastor of the parish of the Holy Family in Ramallah. These years allowed me to work on the formation of lay people, seminarians and catechists. In Ramallah, I was director of the parish school (for two years) then director general of the schools of the Patriarchate (also two years). “The harvest is plentiful” (Mt 9:37), says the Lord. There is always work to be done, and even if we cannot always see the fruit of our work, we leave the rest to the Holy Spirit, the one “who makes the plant grow” (1 Co 3:7).

What I keep in my heart is the urgency of announcing the Word, at the University, at the Seminary, at school... The preparation of pastors, catechists and good educators must remain a priority in the local Church. The Patriarchate has made great progress in this area, thanks to the help of our friends the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre. The schools of the Patriarchate are the main means of continuing our mission in the Holy Land.

Alongside this, the work in the parish has been a grace for me. Meeting parishioners, administering the sacraments, collaborating with the laity... all this has taught me what it means to be a pastor. The parish is a big family, and the solidarity among the parishioners makes them one body, a living community in the Lord. I will miss Sunday Mass!



Mgr. Rafic Nahra: Before my four years of service at the head of the Saint James Vicariate, I had already taken part for more than ten years in the life of Hebrew-speaking Catholic communities. Our communities are small, but very committed, with a family atmosphere that I have always very much appreciated. The team of Vicariate priests is also quite tight-knit; we were able to create beautiful pastoral projects together, especially with young people and children. I thank God who has protected and blessed us in the face of multiple challenges. Contact with the Jewish world was energising for me. I met people who were wonderful in their commitment and openmindedness. It was also very enriching from an intellectual and spiritual point of view because of the richness and creativity of Jewish thought.

My close contact over the past four years with the migrant workers and asylum seekers has given me the opportunity to meet many courageous and very generous people, suffering the greatest poverty. This is unforgettable. It was a difficult mission, because serving the migrants makes you in one way or another a stakeholder in their precarious condition and forces you to face many material, administrative and psychological difficulties. My small experience has allowed me to understand much better the appeals from Pope Francis to welcome, protect, promote and strive to integrate migrants. Our work with migrants focuses on young people and children. The all too brief moments that I was able to spend with the babies in our daycare centres were like a ray of sunshine for me in testing times.

How are you each approaching your new position, and what are the main challenges you will have to face in the years to come?



Mgr. William Shomali: The pastoral plan is still to be developed with the help of our priests and under the direction of the Patriarch. I would like to work towards a growth in faith with our young people and our families. This is the most important and the main reason why the Church exists. With the help of our priests and lay people, we will create faith education centres as well as biblical and catechetical centres. In the near future we will have to work on the Synod of Bishops, convened by Pope Francis, on the theme "communion, participation and mission". Of course, I will continue to promote ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and I will continue to implement liturgical reform. In fact, because of the work of the liturgical commission of which I have been a past member, and thanks to effective collaboration between religious, priests and bishops, we will have the new altar missal in Arabic, a huge work of 1,600 pages, started six years ago.



Mgr. Jamal Daibes: I lived in Jordan before as a pastor more than twenty years ago! We have a lively and active community. I have a lot to learn about this community. The priority will be working with priests, those who work directly in pastoral life. Through them and with them, we can live as a Church in Jordan.

Ecumenical and interreligious relations are always a challenge. How does the teaching of the Gospel and of the Church translate in the context of Jordan? It is about living out our mission as a Church in this rich and sometimes difficult context.

We have twenty-five parish schools in Jordan. Helping the schools in their mission as Catholic schools open to all will be a constant concern. This includes the preparation of catechists, financial support, planning for the future... The laity are active and there are many lay movements: young people, scouts, young families... These movements always need the support and backing of the Church; these movements are also the treasure of the Church in Jordan. The work with Madaba University is very important because it is the only Church-owned University in Jordan. I need to learn more about the situation at the University, especially its mission and daily work.

As I have not lived in Jordan for long, priority at the beginning will be given to listening: listening to priests, lay people, those who work in pastoral life; visiting the parishes, meeting the people, listening to everyone will help me better understand their needs and make the right decisions for the good of the Church. All this will be done in close collaboration with the Patriarch, at the head of the Church in the Holy Land.

Finally, in the Latin Patriarchate, we know that the Church of the Holy Land has a universal, Catholic dimension. We need to be open to the universal Church, and the charity and solidarity of the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre is proof of the concern of the whole Catholic Church for the Church in the Holy Land. We will continue our collaboration for the good of the Church and the glory of God.



Mgr. Rafic Nahra: I am very happy to begin the new mission that the Patriarch has entrusted to me. I would like to meet consistently with the different Catholic communities in Israel: the parishes, the male and female religious communities, the heads of schools and hospitals, the ecclesial movements, etc.

I would like to encourage and develop joint working practices and a common pastoral care within the great diversity of ecclesial groups present. The synodal journey that Rome asks us to make this year should help in this.

I see two main priorities. First, the theological formation of the laity. The Patriarch attaches great importance to the opening of a theological training centre for our lay people so that they can acquire a greater knowledge of Christ, a greater attachment to the Church, and that they are better formed to be good catechists in schools and parishes. I intend to give priority to this training project. Then, youth ministry in Israel. This needs to be developed and unified. Young people and children are very dear to the Church.

Interreligious dialogue is also very important. I am already aware of this through my previous missions, and I would like to get involved.

Interview by François Vayne

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