



Holy Land Commissariat

Franciscan Provincial Office • 47 Victoria Street • Waverley NSW 2024 • Australia
Tel (02) 9369 9300 • Email holyland@franciscans.org.au

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To our Catholic Communities in Australia

Dear friends,

I'm sure October 7 is etched in our memories now as a day when once again the Middle East, and particularly the Holy Land, was devastated with a new wave of violence. The Franciscans have, for eight centuries, been responsible for the care of the many sacred places, as well as schools and parishes in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

It is difficult to not take sides in this conflict, but so far both sides have used extreme methods where many innocent people have been killed.

With Hamas' initial attack on innocent Israeli citizens – infants, children, youth and the elderly – killing more than 1,000, wounding many others and taking 200 hostages, and Israel's response of blocking food, water, fuel, medical supplies and demanding that more than a million people leave their homes; are both acts of extremism and difficult for us in Australia to comprehend.

Pope Francis has called for peace: *"Terrorism and extremism do not help reach a solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but fuel hatred, violence, revenge and only cause each other to suffer. The Middle East does not need war, but peace, a peace built on dialogue and the courage of fraternity... Please do not shed any more innocent blood, neither in the holy land, nor in Ukraine, nor anywhere else! Enough! Wars are always a defeat, always!"*

Besides looking after the pilgrims and pilgrimage sites, the Franciscans look after 15 schools in the Israel/Palestine area and offer wide-ranging housing and social support programmes. The Latin Patriarch looks after another 10 schools. There are two Catholic schools in the Gaza parish – they are part of the Holy Family Parish and part of the Latin Patriarchate. Both communities are currently sheltering families and will need help when the current violence stops. The Holy Child School in Bethlehem provides an intense therapeutic day treatment programme and alternative education for children in the Bethlehem region who suffer from untreated complex mental health issues and exposure to intergenerational trauma.

At this time, I ask you on behalf of all those affected by this conflict to pray for peace. In the near future, I hope to have more information on how you can help but for now, prayer is the best answer.

Let us pray with Psalm 122, 6-9:

*Ask for peace for Jerusalem:
may those who love you live in safety;
let there be peace in your walls,
safety in your palaces.*

*For my brothers and my friends, I will say:
Upon you be peace!
By the house of the Lord our God,
I will ask good for you.*

Sincerely,

Fr Bernie Thomas OFM
Commissary of the Holy Land, Australia