

The “invisible” Church of the Holy Land: The Vicariate of Migrants and Asylum Seekers “VMAS”

Introduction:

Following His Beatitude – Patriarch Pizzaballa’s decision on September 2021, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem vicariates no longer count five, but six unified under the LPJ umbrella.

Today the Vicariates of Cyprus, Israel, Jordan and Palestine together with the Saint James Vicariate for the Hebrew-speaking Catholics have now been joined by the "Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum-Seekers", which operates here under the English acronym "VMAS". Until this time, the Vicariate, already established in April 2018, and has over 100,000 faithfuls from over eight different nationalities.

The beginnings of the pastoral care of migrants in the Latin Patriarchate go back to the 1990s when the number of migrant workers - 90 percent of whom were migrant workers - from the Philippines grew rapidly and a Philippine pastoral care was established, These were followed over time by an Indian chaplaincy, a Sri Lankan chaplaincy and, in 2013, a Ge'ez Rite chaplaincy, the latter primarily for asylum seekers from Eritrea and Ethiopia, whose circumstances are once again very different from those of the migrant workers. Two years earlier, in April 2011, the "Coordination Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants" was established, which in a way is the precursor of the Vicariate "VMAS" established seven years later.

VMAS growing communities are the sisters and brothers on the margins, who are invisible to many of their fellow baptized, since they do not live in the classic Christian places or neighborhoods, and usually do not speak Arabic.

On the other hand, a great many of the migrants and asylum seekers have made themselves invisible, since not all of them are in the country with a valid visa, or a great many are concerned not to give offense to their employers that they are Christians and therefore practice their faith only secretly. This also explains why many of the Eucharistic celebrations and services in this vicariate take place in very unusual, rented locations in shopping malls at surprising times, so that a concealed participation in the service can easily be combined with shopping. Creative solutions to enable our sisters and brothers to celebrate the sacraments is the be-all and end-all in our vicariate.

VMAS is a sign of hope that the Catholic Church in the Holy Land is far larger than suspected - and is indeed growing, though of course under precarious conditions. Especially in the current synodal journey here in the Holy Land. The Latin Patriarch has explicitly encouraged long-established Arabic-speaking Christians to reach out and listen to their migrant brothers and sisters in the faith, just as he has conversely urged migrants and asylum seekers to reach out and listen to local Christians.

The VMAS congregations are very colorful and diverse: the largest are those from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka and Eritrea. The majority of whom celebrate in the Syro-Malabar Rite, the Eritreans and Ethiopians celebrate in the Ge'ez Rite, while the ever-growing number of Ukrainians celebrate in the Byzantine Rite. The others celebrate in the Roman Rite, besides those mentioned, are the very lively communities of English-speaking and French-speaking Africans, the Romanians and the Chinese.

Statement of need

The challenges are numerous. The existing pastoral centers in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are growing as the number of Catholic migrants continues to increase due to the Israeli government’s decision to

replace Palestinian workers with Indian, Romanian and Pilipino workers. There is not enough capacity at the back. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are among the most expensive cities in the world, acquiring new lands is nearly impossible given the current situation and the shrinking resources for the Holy Land. The only option is to rent some facilities for Sunday Services, otherwise this big congregation will not be able to practice its Christian faith.

While the liturgical life in the Vicariate is in impressive flourishing, surely one of the great challenges will be how to assist our sisters and brothers in other areas as well, be it social, legal, medical, and especially in the area of education. There is certainly much to think about and develop in this area, so that we as a church can become more and more a place of shelter, protection and seeking God for those entrusted to the LPJ.

At the moment, VMAS serves 56 communities around the country - 17 Malayalam Speaking Indian Communities (2 to be added soon), 1 Gujarati Speaking Indian Community, 5 Konkani speaking Indian communities, 14 Filipino Communities, 3 Geez Rite Communities, 4 Sri Lankan Communities, 1 English Speaking African Community, 1 French Speaking African Community, 2 Spanish Speaking American Communities, 1 Romanian Community, 4 Ukrainian Communities, 1 Polish Community and 2 Chinese community.

It is worth noting that these communities are not static, they grow and shrink. The many difficulties in some of the countries, for example, the current problems in Sri Lanka are causing a fast growth of the Sri Lankan Community in the Holy Land.

How can you help?

The total funds required each year to support this viable community is around **700,000 USD**, the VMAS congregations can be supported in many ways, the main needs are as follows:

- **Renting space for Sunday services, daycare and pastoral activities:** The VMAS faithful are not where the churches are, and the churches are not where they are.
- **Honorariums and Stipends for clergy and nuns**
- **Food cost:** for poor children and other communities at daycare, pastoral and educational centers.
- **Repairs, utilities, transportation, communication and maintenance.**
- **Humanitarian, legal and social needs**

ONE BIG DREAM

What is unique about this community is that the poorest of the poor are donating to keep their faith alive within their congregations, but of course there are limits. To avoid discrimination and racism from the larger Israeli society, the LPJ strives to raise enough resources to acquire their own properties to host their pastoral activities, daycare, cultural and to establish an educational center for youth.