

Holy Land: Christmas is near, but the atmosphere is not one of joy

The days leading up to Christmas are particularly intense. Institutional and community meetings are held in accordance with the regulations enshrined in the various conventions. I am in charge of relations between the Custody of the Holy Land and the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and these are days of meetings, moments of sharing that are very important for the people of the Holy Land. These meetings are important because they provide an opportunity to exchange views, to receive and give support to each other's activities, and to rekindle harmony and relationships. At this moment in history, when the tragedy of war is raging, these meetings lacked the atmosphere of previous years. I saw pain and suffering in all the people I met, in spite of their personal visions, their respective solutions to situations, their mutual views, which were steeped in hatred and revenge. Christmas, the main reason for the meetings, seemed to have been forgotten in all the speeches, while the anxiety and fear that the war will last for a long time prevailed in all of them. The situation in the Holy Land is steadily deteriorating. The joy at the imminent coming of the Saviour is tempered with mixed feelings at the prospect of a long-awaited end to a war that has yet to see its longed-for conclusion.



[The status quo envisages an official invitation by the Custody of the Holy Land to the President of the Palestinian Authority to attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve in the Church of St Catherine in Bethlehem. On Tuesday 19 December, together with Father Francesco Patton, Custos, we travelled to Ramallah to meet President Abu Mazen and officially invite him to the Christmas celebrations. The meeting took place in the usual cordial atmosphere and the President expressed his gratitude for having presented his letter to Pope Francis. He said that he would have written to him on his birthday, reiterating his affection and gratitude for His Holiness' remarkable commitment to peace. President Abu Mazen confirmed his presence at the Holy Mass in Bethlehem as a sign of his respect for the Christian Churches, in the hope that the guns will fall silent, he said: "...that peace may prevail in the Land of Peace!"](#) **Meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan.** Together with a delegation of religious leaders from Jerusalem and Jordan, we met with King Abdullah in Amman on Wednesday 20 December. King Abdullah has a historic attachment to Jerusalem and to the care of Muslim and Christian holy sites. The Custos was joined by the Latin Patriarch, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and by various Christian Church leaders, who thanked the King for stressing the importance of remaining united in the face of the consequences and destruction of war. King Abdullah called for an immediate ceasefire and for the two parties to resume negotiations with the common goal of successfully resolving the conflict in this important area of the Middle East. **Meeting with Israeli President Herzog.** Another important meeting took place on Thursday 21 December. Together with the other heads of Christian Churches, we met the President of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Herzog, at his residence in Jerusalem. The traditional meeting for Christmas greetings was also an opportunity to share reflections on the current situation. The meeting, normally very festive, was kept strictly private because of the war. The Israeli people are also living in fear and hardship at the moment, and it is a truly difficult time for all humanity.



The atmosphere of this coming Christmas is not one of joy, unlike in previous years, even though the Holy Land has not enjoyed periods of absolute calm. There is a widespread sadness that can be seen above all in the eyes of the people, all the people, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Fear, suffering and anguish are feelings common to both peoples. May Faith and Hope not fail us, for great is the Mercy of our Saviour. May the whole world enjoy a blessed Christmas of peace and serenity! * Vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land

Padre Ibrahim Faltas*