

Jerusalem (cont)

The class provided an opportunity to visit the places referenced in our lessons and in our preaching beyond the archaeological evidence. From the pastoral and educational perspective, it was fascinating to finally experience these historical places and environments, and to know their human realities as well. Their history surpasses any expectations in our imagination. We learned that this encounter with the Holy Land requires all five senses; it is necessary to have the time and be fully engaged to construct an outline of its reality.

The other Jerusalem, beyond the beauty of the places and the symbolic richness they represent, is very complex. I refer to the particular tension that exists due to the convergence of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions that claim the same history. Muslims, Jews and Christians each live their faith in a very particular way, recognizing that the earth they inhabit is a gift from God. But hostility intensifies when that gift is appropriated exclusively.

However, speaking of Muslims, Jews and Christians is not talking about clearly defined categories. Behind each one of these religions, are complex traditions that expand the diversity, and, unfortunately, also the tension throughout Israel. There are political and social origins that, related to historical foreign interventions, make the Holy Land a challenging place to build peace for all. Proof of this is the eternal Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is especially harmful to the population in most need.

It is complicated to summarize what the encounter with such a complex scope has meant. However, it has invited me to reflect on the importance of interreligious dialogue in the conflicts that, as in Israel or Jerusalem, are experienced day by day in many countries. But it has been encouraging to see how, from within this reality, we can raise voices and initiatives that dream and work for a different reality.

In the dynamics of the course, "Jerusalem: One City—Three Religions," we had the opportunity to interact with components of different religious, cultural and political topics about Israel. But we also got to know important archaeological sites, religious temples and very interesting Israeli traditions. Above all, we got to interact with people and understand the reality of life in the Holy Land. At the end of the course we were asked to work on a project that would contribute to the dialogue and understanding of other expressions of life.

The inspiration to develop my final project came from a very emotional experience. On a Sunday that I was walking towards the Mount of Olives, I passed through the Arab area of Jerusalem when I heard somebody shouting at me from a window. He was an Arab boy about four years old. He was making efforts, amid tender smiles, to greet me by waving his hand and throwing kisses at me, to which I responded in the same way. It was very moving. I reflected that this child showed me his appreciation without caring who I was! Is not this a sample and example to follow in the possibility of interreligious dialogue? What role do these new generations play in interreligious and inter-ethnic conflicts? What are the effects on children of religious intolerance promoted in adult-centric societies?

The theological-educational-ludic proposal “Mission Flourish” is based on this experience. It uses a game to stimulate a more human consciousness in terms of coexistence and peace for children in environments with religious, ethnic or cultural conflict. The objective is to design a game for children that would provide a space for socialization and learning from the fun, reflection, communication and order that the game proposes. The game transcends borders and cultures using an allegory: the tree. In the international course of STI 2019 we addressed the Pauline allegory of the olive tree (Romans 11), and this inspires the current dynamics. It is a representation of easy assimilation and semantic richness that can help to derive important reflections between boys and girls, not only in Jerusalem but anywhere else where human conflict is similar.

The project was well received and seen as a tool for reaching the largely ignored sector and victim of religious and ethnic conflict: children. In our opinion, the great peace agreements in round table dialogues are very important, but the efforts to create cultures of peace especially in the new generations are also important.

In terms of interreligious dialogue, it is important to explore the roots of the conflicts, to delve into the religious, ethnic, cultural and political paradigms that continue to nurture different social and religious groups today. The irony that clouds the panorama is that the different traditions share the message of peace, but at the same time create their own resistances one against the other.

I closed my participation in the international course of STI 2019, not only perceiving the reality or realities of the Holy Land, but also proposing a resource that represents some usefulness in the construction of peace.

Life requires different antagonistic groups to understand the reality of “The Other.” Some respond to this call, and some others do not. And that is the case in many countries, making it challenging to think about the importance and effort involved in working for peace. This is especially true for those of the Christian faith who proclaim a message that constitutes good news for all. With this good news we can raise up a “holy land” in Latin America - Guatemala, a land that shows holiness as long as it demonstrates the government of peace and justice.

The psalmist said, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” Today is our time to pray and act for the peace of the whole world.