Dear Friends,

Greetings from Jerusalem.

Over the past months, many of you have written or called us asking essentially the same question: **How are things really going in the Holy Land?**

It is an understandable question.

If you are watching the news from abroad, the picture can still appear deeply troubling. The conflict involving Iran and the United States continues. There are still serious incidents in Gaza and Lebanon. We do not want to minimize any of this, nor the very real suffering experienced by people throughout our region.

But we also want to share something that is much harder to see from a television screen:

The headlines are real, but they are not the whole picture.

Here on the ground, we are also seeing smaller developments that rarely receive the same international attention. None of them individually means that peace has arrived. Taken together, however, they suggest something important: diplomacy has not disappeared, practical agreements are still being made, and the possibility of gradual de-escalation remains alive.

In Lebanon, for example, despite continuing military incidents, there remains a U.S.-brokered framework intended ultimately to restore Lebanese state control in the south, address Hezbollah's military presence and facilitate Israeli withdrawal. Confidence-building measures have also taken place, including the release of Lebanese detainees through international mediation.

The wider confrontation with Iran is likewise far from resolved. There continue to be alarming developments, particularly around the Gulf. Yet even throughout this conflict, governments and intermediaries have continued searching for mechanisms that could eventually move the confrontation away from the battlefield and back toward diplomacy.

It is also important to remember that both Israel and the United States are presently in highly political periods, with elections approaching in both countries. Security and foreign policy naturally occupy a prominent place in electoral campaigns, and political rhetoric can become particularly forceful during such periods. At Via Emmaus, therefore, we try not to judge the situation solely by speeches, political declarations or the most dramatic television headline. **We look closely at what is actually happening on the ground.**

Gaza and the Geography of a Pilgrimage

Gaza understandably remains at the center of international attention. The humanitarian suffering there remains very serious, and violence has unfortunately not disappeared.

For prospective pilgrims, however, there is also an important geographical distinction that is sometimes lost in international coverage. **Gaza is a separate coastal enclave and is not part of the route traveled on a traditional pilgrimage to the Holy Land.** Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee lie within an entirely different travel geography. Our groups do not enter Gaza, pass through it or travel alongside it.

This helps explain something we often hear from visitors themselves: the experience of actually being in the holy places can feel remarkably different from the impression formed by watching events from abroad. Churches continue their daily liturgies, pilgrims walk the streets of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, groups travel through Galilee, restaurants receive guests and ordinary life continues around them.

This does not diminish what is happening in Gaza. **It simply places it in its proper geographical context for someone considering a pilgrimage.**

And even within the difficult news from Gaza, there are developments worth watching that receive comparatively less attention.

A U.S.-backed process announced this summer includes, for the first time, an agreement in principle toward the phased disarmament of Hamas and other armed groups. The proposed process remains fragile and contested, and significant disagreements remain over its implementation and the sequencing of Israeli withdrawal. Yet the fact that disarmament itself is now the subject of an agreed negotiating framework would have been difficult to imagine not long ago.

American negotiators have also continued pressing the parties toward practical confidence-building measures. Recent discussions have included steps to improve water and sanitation conditions inside Gaza while negotiations over security, governance and reconstruction continue.

None of this means that the Gaza conflict has been solved. **It has not.** But it illustrates the quieter reality we mentioned earlier: even while disturbing headlines continue, negotiations continue too. Positions that once appeared immovable can begin to change, humanitarian measures can be agreed, and small steps can create the possibility of larger ones.

Perhaps this is what gradual peace looks like before anyone is ready to call it peace.

What We Are Seeing on the Ground

And beyond diplomacy, we are seeing other encouraging signs.

Major international airlines are returning. Delta has now resumed its daily nonstop service between New York JFK and Tel Aviv following its own review of the security environment. United Airlines has also returned to the Tel Aviv market from Newark. European connectivity continues to provide substantial additional access through the major European hubs.

The principal pilgrimage corridors continue to operate. Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee and the other places at the heart of a traditional Christian pilgrimage remain part of operating itineraries, with conditions monitored continuously.

Jordan, too, has seen an improvement in the aviation-risk assessment compared with earlier this summer, making combined Holy Land and Jordan programs increasingly practical again.

Most importantly, **pilgrims are returning**.

Israel's official tourism figures have shown a steady improvement through the summer. The recovery is not complete, and visitor numbers remain far below what we considered normal before the war. But month after month, more people are coming back.

This is perhaps the part of the story that receives the least attention.

Airplanes returning to Ben Gurion Airport do not make the evening news in the same way that a missile does. A group walking quietly through the streets of Jerusalem does not become a breaking-news alert. Pilgrims praying in Bethlehem, celebrating Mass in Galilee, renewing their baptismal promises at the Jordan River or walking the Via Dolorosa rarely appear on television.

But these things are happening.

And at Via Emmaus, we are seeing this return with our own eyes.

As I write this update, we are presently welcoming a pilgrimage group from the United States. In the coming weeks, we are preparing to receive pilgrims from Mexico, Brazil and Poland. October will bring several more groups from Latin America as well as another group from the United States, followed in November by pilgrims arriving from Spain and additional countries across Latin America.

For us, these are more than numbers on a tourism report. They are priests, parishioners, families and friends who have made the decision to come. They are buses once again traveling between the holy sites, Masses being celebrated by visiting groups, hotel rooms being occupied and local guides, drivers, restaurants and Christian communities once again welcoming pilgrims.

This, too, is part of the reality of the Holy Land today.

Pilgrimage as Solidarity

There is another dimension to this return that is especially meaningful to us.

Pilgrimage has always been more than tourism. For the Christian communities of the Holy Land, the return of pilgrims is also a powerful expression of solidarity. Their presence supports the churches and institutions that safeguard the holy places, but it also sustains the guides, drivers, hotel employees, restaurants, artisans, shops and families whose livelihoods have been deeply affected by the absence of pilgrims over these past years.

Those who choose to return now therefore do something more than visit the places of the Gospel. **Simply by being here, they stand alongside the living Christian community that continues to call this land home.**

And many visitors are surprised by another reality that is difficult to communicate through the news: despite the turmoil of the wider region, daily life across much of the traditional pilgrimage route can feel remarkably calm. Pilgrims continue to pray in the churches, walk through the holy places, travel through the countryside of Galilee and sit together around the dinner table.

Looking Ahead

We have lived and worked in this land long enough to know that peace here rarely arrives in one dramatic moment. Sometimes it begins much more quietly with small developments. These small developments should not make us naïve about the challenges that remain. But neither should the difficult headlines make us blind to them.

The road toward peace may still be long. It may move forward slowly and sometimes take a step backward. But there are signs—small ones, perhaps—that the needle can move. And perhaps this is precisely when pilgrimage matters most. For centuries, Christians have come to this land not because its history was simple, but because amid its complexity they encountered the places where Christ taught reconciliation, forgiveness, hope and peace.

We look forward with hope to welcoming many of you back to the Holy Land.

Sincerely,

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