

Hope for Peace in the Holy Land

Bishop Paul Dempsey, Seán Farrell and Rev. Dr Gary Carville were Ireland's representatives on this year's Holy Land Coordination pilgrimage.

In January 2026, Holy Land Coordination made its annual pilgrimage to the Holy Land, bringing together bishops and church leaders from across Europe, North America and South Africa. The theme of this year's visit was 'A Land of Promise: Encounter and Dialogue with People of Hope'. Ireland's representatives were Bishop Paul Dempsey, auxiliary bishop of Dublin and chair of Trócaire, Seán Farrell, CEO of Trócaire and Rev. Dr Gary Carville, of the Irish Bishops' Conference. In this article, they recount their experience in the Holy Land.

A 'Land of Promise' was the powerful theme of this year's Holy Land Coordination bishops' visit. This visit takes place every year to regions of the eastern Mediterranean, encompassing Israel, the Palestinian territories and parts of neighbouring countries revered by Christians, Jews and Muslims as the birthplace of those three faiths and the setting of many sacred events.

After more than two years of conflict, genocide and famine in Gaza and forced displacement in the West Bank, our group visited a land where people are suffering deep trauma. There may be a ceasefire in Gaza, but it is a ceasefire in name only. In the

West Bank, persecution of Palestinians continues.

Church representatives and local organisations described to the delegation a systematic campaign of violence and intimidation across the West Bank, aimed at driving Palestinian families from their land. The scale and intensity of this escalation is unprecedented in recent decades, amounting to a land grab that is forcing Palestinians into ever-smaller, overcrowded enclaves and effectively extinguishing the prospect of a viable Palestinian state.

In the occupied West Bank, many villages have been dispersed and the people displaced. Extreme violence from settlers and pressure from the state have corralled the population into just 18% of the land. In Taybeh, the only fully Christian village in the West Bank, an estimated 90% of residents have left.

We visited Bedouin communities living on the margins of society. They shared their experiences of a life on the periphery, their movement heavily restricted by rapidly expanding illegal settlements encircling them on the surrounding hills. In the Jordan valley, we witnessed a community in its last throws – packing cars and trucks and leaving their homeland after a



Palestinians are living among their destroyed homes in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip

sustained campaign of violence. The desperate message from the people was the same: ‘No one sees us.’

We spoke to the parish priest of Gaza, who described the unlivable conditions in Gaza where 80% of buildings, hospitals, schools and roads have been destroyed. With electricity, water and sewage systems largely wiped out and severe shortages of medicine, tens of thousands of people are living in a sea of tents. Bitter winter temperatures and ferocious winds have deepened the humanitarian catastrophe.

As Christians it is our calling and duty to give a voice to the voiceless and to bear witness to their dignity, so that the world may know their suffering and be moved to advocate for justice and compassion.

Our hope, like many, is that efforts for peace will prevail over violence.

We were deeply moved by the faith and steadfastness of local Christians and also by people of other faiths who work to sustain the hope of their communities. They remind us that it is our shared vocation to be ‘salt of the earth’ and ‘light of the world’ and to strive for peaceful coexistence and security across the Holy Land.

Such church and faith groups are often a bridge for peace. We met many examples of what these bridges can be. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, is one such person. His calls for peace, protection of civilians, humanitarian access and dialogue amid the ongoing conflict are a testament to Catholic Social Teaching in practice.

We also witnessed the courage of those Jewish and Palestinian voices who, despite immense challenges and



Palestinians carry flour and food aid they received at the Zikim crossing in the central Gaza Strip

their own trauma, continue to advocate for justice, dialogue and reconciliation. We spoke with Jewish rabbis travelling to Palestinian villages to plant trees with a local community. We witnessed a young Jewish man and young Palestinian Christian man speak about their courageous work in building peace and understanding through engaging with schools and youth groups to break down the hatred and deep-seated mistrust that exists.

Perhaps the truest testament to hope came in a meeting between a Jewish Israeli mother, a Palestinian Muslim father and a Palestinian Christian father who shared the devastating loss of their children in the conflict. From that shared grief, they have begun working together to foster understanding, break cycles of hatred and build peace – remembering their children not with

revenge but with a commitment to living without hatred.

Hearing from parents who have lost a child to conflict and can still find a way to forgive offers a powerful witness to the possibility of peace and reconciliation. Few experiences are more devastating. When such a mother or father pleads for an end to violence, the world must listen and act.

We urge the Irish government to exert pressure on the government of Israel to uphold the rules-based international order and to revive meaningful negotiations toward a two-state solution for the benefit and security of all.

We left this ‘Land of Promise’ with our hearts full of compassion for those who are suffering and inspired by those who, by their pursuit of justice, keep the hope of peace alive.