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### To Stand Beside and Witness With

*Reflection by Giulia Bordin, Advocacy Officer at Pax Christi International, part of a delegation in the Holy Land in November 2025, attending the Kairos Palestine Conference*



Returning to Palestine, I thought my heart had been prepared, yet the reality unfolded with a depth no amount of readiness could truly meet. The reality in the West Bank is beyond imagination, even after years of following updates, listening and reading testimonies, and working with colleagues from the Holy Land. Still, from “outside”, the concrete, tangible truth remains elusive, as if wrapped in a veil. Only when you stand there, among the walls, the roads split in two, the checkpoints that dictate the rhythm of breath, does the truth reveal itself in its fullness, its heaviness, its unexpected tenderness.

From the moment we landed, the encounter with presence and control was immediate. Posters with slogans and the questions from passport control reminded me that entering this land is never neutral, it is always political, always observed, where even small acts are analysed with suspicion. These moments framed the pilgrimage not just as a journey of the heart, but as an embodied experience of the daily realities Palestinians face.

Oppression here is not abstract; it moves through the streets like a climate—palpable, pressing, sometimes suffocating. Control is built into the landscape: roads that run parallel but never meet, gates that open for some and close for others, walls that twist to reshape entire communities. Even the plants and trees have been imported, altering the scenery in subtle, deliberate ways. Every turn, every checkpoint, every silence feels engineered, leaving the air itself heavy. The deepest wounds, however, lie not only in these visible restrictions but in the uncertainty that shadows every act: turning a corner, crossing a road, “being in the wrong place at



the wrong time". A quiet disillusionment settles over those who have lived too long with broken promises and an international presence that flickers in and out like a failing light.

And yet, everywhere, there is life. There is an astonishing, unyielding life. I felt resilience everywhere I looked, in the quiet determination of those who keep moving forward. At Pyalara, I witnessed youth being empowered to navigate the digital and social world while engaging with pressing social issues, cultivating resilience and the courage to advocate, even amid a challenging political landscape. During the EAPPI handover ceremony, reflections echoed that peace is not the erasure of difference, but its embrace, and even in darkness, hope can be found. On the Mount of Olives, the Comboni Sisters showed us that courage often appears quietly, in acts of steadfast care.

At Wi'Am, we drank the sage tea they had offered, the leaves grown in their own land under the separation wall, and in that simple sharing I felt the philosophy that shapes everything here: nonviolence, resilience, and steadfast care. Zoughbi spoke of "unharmed struggle," of carrying on without violence, and it was evident in every interaction. The centre's doors are always open, but weapons are never welcome; dialogue, storytelling, and interfaith exchange are the tools of their work. Here each story, each lesson drawn from scripture or from experience, becomes a way to transform anger, nurture understanding, and strengthen community. It is in these practices, guiding women, mentoring youth, building bridges across faiths, that the values of perseverance and commitment are lived, and in seeing this, I understood *sumud* not as an abstract idea but as something tangible, threaded through daily life.

At the Arab Educational Institute, the women's groups shared their stories with us, recounting moments of danger, courage, and careful resilience. One mother described protecting her son from settlers, another the months a soldier occupied her home, and in their accounts I felt how *sumud* is lived quietly, through vigilance, prayer, and measured action. AEI programmes provide a framework for processing trauma, nurturing hope, and building resilience, not just for themselves but for the next generation. In the conversations and the gestures of these women, the lunch they prepared and offered us, I saw how knowledge, reflection, and care become forms of strength, sustaining life and community even in the shadow of occupation.

While meeting with the Nassar family from the Tent of Nations, it reconfirmed to me that their farm is a living testament to perseverance under relentless pressure. Caravans encroach, roads cut through the land, and settlers continue to escalate challenges, while court rulings remain unenforced. Yet amid these hardships, the family labours to make the farm self-sustainable, nurturing the land and the community, welcoming volunteers, and sustaining hope through prayer and careful action.

Walking through the Aida Refugee Camp, I traced the legacy of displacement from the Nakba of 1948 and saw resilience at the Aida Youth Centre, where history, education, and advocacy transform memory into tools for survival. At L'Arche Bethlehem, dignity and inclusion are lived in every gesture. Here, hope and human connection endure side by side, each amplifying the other.

There is *sumud* that lives in ordinary gestures: a cup of sage tea shared in welcome, a mother protecting her son with nothing but her voice, a family tending olive trees planted as acts of faith. People speak truth even



when truth is costly, because truth itself is resilience, steadfastness. They pray even when the world has forgotten how. They remember, because remembering is survival.

The Kairos Palestine Conference at Bethlehem Bible College brought this reflection into sharper focus. Over two hundred participants gathered to confront the realities of occupation, apartheid, and ongoing suffering, and to ground faith in action. The Kairos Document itself emerged as a living voice, amplifying decades of witness. We were reminded that faith demands risk, that it calls us to speak truth, defend life, and stand and act with those who endure. We are called to “reroute, reconnect, recommit,” to stand with courage and prophetic witness, and to envision a world where faith defends life, not empire. The clearer we speak and act today, the clearer will be for future generations to understand what happened and make sure we break the cycle of violence.

Attending the conference, hearing the voices of the Palestinian Churches and its allies, I felt the weight of history and the call to action. Every word of the Kairos Document became inseparable from the lived reality I had witnessed: the checkpoints, the walls, the tear gas, but also the laughter, the resilience, and the steadfastness that refuses to be broken. It reaffirmed to me that hope is not passive: it is costly, it is active, it requires courage and solidarity, and it travels with those who choose to witness and act.

In a private meeting with H.E. Michel Sabbah, he reminded us that for Pax Christi International to stand with life takes three things: prayer, advocacy, and steadiness. Not in abstract terms, but as acts that shape daily presence. To pray is to let the heart stay open, even when the world hardens around you; to advocate is to carry truth into spaces that resist it; to remain calm is to meet injustice without letting it turn us aside.

I carry in my heart the suffering, the tension, and the weight of all I witnessed, but also, and I would say mostly, the joy, the friendship, the unexpected moments of care that filled each day. Palestinians know intimately the cost and power of love, and they practice it everyday, regardless. They know hope is fragile, but they guard it fiercely, nourishing it like a flame sheltered between cupped hands. Their hope is an act of defiance. A daily resurrection.

Hope, I learned again, is never ours alone. It travels with us, across borders, through walls, over distances imposed and imagined. It survives in every person we meet who refuses to stop believing that justice, somehow, will break through.

#### **We are compelled to witness.**

To stand where suffering is real, where courage grows from the soil of despair, where people continue to say: we are (still) here. In returning to Palestine, I did not just see the truth, I was seen by it. And I left carrying not only sorrow, but a deeper conviction that love and solidarity, steadfast and costly as they may be, remain the ground from which just peace must rise.