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Benedictine Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel, leader of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem's Old City (Courtesy of Dormition Abbey Jerusalem)



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For more than 20 years, German-born Nikodemus Schnabel has lived as a Benedictine monk in Jerusalem. Last year, he was elected abbot of his community. Its monastery, Dormition Abbey, is an important landmark for Christian pilgrims. Catholics believe it to be the place of Mary's death and assumption into heaven.

But the abbey's location on Mount Zion on the edge of Jerusalem's old city makes it a political hotspot as well. It is situated right next to King David's tomb, one of the holiest sites in Judaism.

For years, the Catholic monastery has been an exposed target for radical Jewish extremists. Since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war last October, life has become more difficult than ever, Schnabel said in a recent NCR phone interview.

At the start of the war, the abbot said he and his brothers decided not to abandon their home, but to stay right in the center of Jerusalem. So far, security hasn't been their primary concern.

"The biggest challenge right now are our finances," said Schnabel. "We live off of pilgrims and tourists. These days we might sell four cups of coffee a day — that won't even cover our electrical bill."



A view of Dormition Abbey and Church in Jerusalem's Old City (Wikimedia Commons/Oleg Moro)

Thirty-eight employees work for the abbey. Even though they aren't really needed without any tourists, the monks decided against firing them.



"Most of them are Palestinian Christians. If I let them go, we will not only see them slip into poverty, but their whole families as well," said the abbot.

How does the monastery pay them? "We reach into our retirement funds. It's highly risky, but I still want to be able to look at myself in the mirror each morning."

At the moment, they're losing a significant five-figure number each month, Schnabel said.

As it looks now, the economic situation will not change through this year's Holy Week either. Usually, pilgrims from all over the world flock to the Holy Land between Palm Sunday and Easter. This year the numbers are negligible.

Jerusalem's Christian Information Center told German Catholic news agency KNA that, between March and May of last year, 4,500 pilgrim groups were booking and celebrating Mass at Jerusalem's holy sites. This year, the center expects [no more than 300](#).

"This will be a very quiet and intimate Easter," said Schnabel. "Usually, priests who want to concelebrate our Masses during Holy Week have to reserve a spot ahead of time. This year, they won't need to."

The Benedictine monks had a taste of such quiet festivities last Christmas.

On Holy Night, the monks usually take many guests on a pilgrimage from Jerusalem to Jesus' birthplace in nearby Bethlehem, crossing checkpoints and entering the Palestinian Territories. At the Church of the Nativity, thousands of faithful celebrate the birth of their savior throughout the night. "Last year, we were the only ones there," said the abbot.

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Pia Steckelbach, a Tel Aviv-based journalist who has covered Israel and the Palestinian Territories for years, said: "The situation is dire, especially economically."

Steckelbach recalled visiting Bethlehem last Christmas as well. "The otherwise lively and illuminated streets were empty, there were no tourists and the suffering in Gaza prohibited displays of joy on the streets," she said. "Things won't look any different

at Easter. Where the scouts used to train for their parades, it's currently all quiet."

Even though the tourists aren't coming to the abbey at the moment, Schnabel said he draws hope from local Christian communities, who show up for prayer and Mass in greater numbers than they used to.

"This is very important," he said. "In these trying times, it is a big help for believers to come together at the altar and celebrate a bit of hope and community."

This all happens at a time when not only war and economics come as a challenge to Christians in the Holy Land. More and more communities are reporting attacks by religious extremists.

Schnabel himself was [attacked in February](#) by two young men on the street, who spat on his pectoral cross and tried to rip it from his neck. The incident was caught on camera, and caused a small stir in Israeli media.

Steckelbach said attacks against Christians have risen in Israel, and ascribed some of the blame to the composition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government, which includes several controversial right-wing figures and has been described as the [most conservative](#) in the country's history.



A German theology student reads the psalms during a day of prayers and fasting for peace in the Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion in the Old City of Jerusalem, Oct. 17, 2023. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

Several of the parties included in the coalition have spoken out against the Christian presence in the Holy Land for years. Chief among them is Itamar Ben-Gvir, Netanyahu's current national security minister.

In 2015, Jewish extremists set fire to the Benedictine monastery in Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Ben-Gvir served as the suspected arsonists' defense lawyer at trial.

After the attack on Schnabel, the Israeli government spoke up. Foreign Minister Israel Katz called it an "ugly incident." On X (formerly Twitter), [he posted](#): "Under Israeli rule members of all faiths enjoy total freedom of worship, as never has been the case before. In the words of the prophet: 'My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.' "

Schnabel called on the Israeli government to do more, and to guard against an "explosion of violence" against Christians.

"Of course, Israel is not as unsafe for Christians as, for example, North Korea, but that shouldn't be the standard," he said. "This problem is being ignored and denied."

Amid everything, Schnabel doesn't want to give up. The message he wants to spread ahead of Easter is hope and understanding in a land where these values can be hard to come by.

"We're not neutral in the conflict," he says. "We see tremendous suffering on both sides. I've lost friends in the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 as well as in Gaza."

"We are surrounded by an ocean of sorrow, so we're neither pro-Israeli nor pro-Palestinian," said the abbot. "We are pro-human, as every single person was made in God's image."