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An older white man with glasses wearing a clerical collar speaks into a microphone while a pr

Archbishop Tommaso Caputo, prelate of Pompeii, Italy, and assessor of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, speaks during a news conference at the Vatican as Valencia Yvonne Camp, lieutenant of the U.S. Middle Atlantic Lieutenancy of the order, listens Oct. 31, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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As leaders of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem prepared to meet in Rome, the explosion of violence between Israel and Hamas highlighted the importance of their prayers and their material support for local Christians, leaders of the order said.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni, grand master of the order and a former papal diplomat in Iran, Iraq and Jordan, told reporters Oct. 31 that Christians of the Holy Land and those who support them are called to offer themselves as bridges, trying to get both sides to see that affirming the rights of one community does not necessarily mean denying the rights of the other.

"One cannot think that Israel has no right to exist, to be, to remain," he said, "just as one cannot think that the people of Palestine have no right to exist, to be, to live."

As long as people claim that the rights of one community are greater than the rights of the other, there will be tension, he said.

With the Hamas attack on Israel Oct. 7 and the ongoing Israeli siege of Gaza, the "consulta" or plenary assembly of the leaders of the knights and dames of the Holy Sepulchre, scheduled for Nov. 6-10 in Rome, has undergone modifications. For one thing, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, will address the gathering by video link rather than in person.

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The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem was established by the pope in the late 1800s to support the Latin patriarchate through prayer, donations and regular pilgrimages.

Valencia Yvonne Camp, lieutenant of the order's U.S. Middle Atlantic Lieutenancy, told reporters that the order keeps members informed about what is happening in the Holy Land and the impact it is having on the local Christian community, which is Palestinian.

"We try to put a face on the Holy Land," she said. "It is not a 'place' that we talk about, but home for men and women and children. The knights and dames need to know and want to know that there are mothers and fathers and children, grandchildren -- very much like their own -- who want to live, who want to learn and grow and advance in their lives."

The Catholics of Gaza, whose homes have been bombed or who have been forced to flee south or to seek shelter in their church or in schools and hospitals, are "people who pray the rosary, who attend Mass, who walk their children to school, who wonder if they're going to be able to get medicine or get food, or to send their child to college, to have any type of career or work or job," she said.

Leonardo Visconti di Modrone, governor general of the order, told reporters that in addition to the regular donations the order's 30,000 members send to the Latin Patriarchate -- $13 million to $15 million annually -- additional donations are arriving each day the violence continues. The money is sent directly to Jerusalem and the

patriarchate decides where it is needed most.