

# **Christian Situation in the Holy Land**

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**Educational Resource**

**Volume 4: Ashes and Saints**

## Dedicated to Our Lady, Queen of Palestine



### Crux/Globe interview with Cardinal Grand Master Edwin O'Brien:

**Conventionally, it's said that John Paul II is the Pope who brought down the Berlin Wall.  
Will Francis be the Pope who brings down the Bethlehem Wall?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** *"Who would have predicted that John Paul II's slow but steady wearing down of the forces in Eastern Europe would have led to the revolutions of 1989 and 1990? I'm not sure that even the Pope saw it coming. There's a good analogy between what John Paul set in motion and what Francis is trying to do now, and we can only hope they turn out similarly."*

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**Editor: Jeffery M. Abood, KCHS**

Co-Chair - Education Committee, North Central Lieutenancy

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## **Support for the Christian Situation in the Holy Land Series**

"Once again, permit me to express my gratitude for your valuable efforts to tell the tragic story of our beleaguered fellow Christians in the Holy Land. I trust that this third issue will be received by our Lieutenancies as a useful and most appropriate resource in the attempt to inform all our members--and others--of the plight of the Churches in that Land made sacred by the Death and Resurrection of Our Lord. Again, I invoke the intercession of Our Lady of Palestine for the success of your generous efforts!"

**His Eminence Edwin Cardinal O'Brien  
Grand Master, Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem**

"Dramatic events occur in our region and few will rush off to find sources of information that will explain in capsule summaries what is unfolding and why. At times, the media, glib and conflicting in their reports and polarized according to their bias, assemble facts to suit opinions. This booklet endeavors to bring an educative, informed and illumined Christian perspective from authentic Church resources on the Christian position in the Holy Land."

**His Beatitude, Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch  
Grand Prior, Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem**

"In today's modern age, there is a great deal of information available about Christians in the Holy Land. In an effort to assist in helping provide a clearer picture of their reality, we applaud the compilation of this educational material. Drawing together Church sources, this packet provide a clear, concise and most importantly accurate view of who the Christians in the Holy Land are and how they are living. It provides an excellent resource for the members of the Order."

**His Excellency William Shomali  
Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem**

"I am grateful to Jeffery Abood, KCHS for his educational resources on the "Christian Situation in the Holy Land." From many different sources he has compiled important and helpful material on the Holy Land. Thank you to the North Central Lieutenancy. You have provided a great service to all of us!"

**Fr. Jeremy Harrington, O.F.M.  
Commissary and Guardian of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land**

"The Christian Situation in the Holy Land" is a rich compilation of church statements, news articles and releases from local church bodies to give a fine-grained picture of the difficult life Christians lead in the Holy Land. With materials found nowhere else, the Christian Situation will enlighten scholars and pilgrims, as well as, veteran advocates of peace in the Holy Land."

**Fr. Drew Christiansen, S.J.  
Canon of the Holy Sepulchre  
Former Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace**

## Introduction

**The theme of His Beatitudes' Christmas message is: it is the best of times, it is the worst of times.** Building on that theme, the 4th volume of this educational series continues to compile the statements, documents and interviews of the Church hierarchy, as they speak to the Christian situation in the Holy Land. This volume explores the trials, tribulations and ultimately the hopes of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land from the Church's perspective. For them, it has truly been a year of Ashes and Saints.

**The Editor**

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## Christmas Message of His Beatitude Fouad Twal

Thursday, 18 December 2014

JERUSALEM – His Beatitude Fouad Twal gave his Christmas message through his Vicar in Jerusalem and Palestine, Bishop William Shomali, during the press conference which was held this Thursday, December 18 at Terra Santa College. That was also the occasion to inaugurate the new Christian Media Center (CMC).

His Beatitude Fouad Twal  
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem  
December 18, 2014



**Dear friends, dear people of the Holy Land,**

I wish you and all your loved ones a blessed Christmas! Dear journalists, in greeting you this morning, I thank you for your work and it is my hope that you will always carry it out with wisdom and in truth. Once again, I express my admiration and respect for those of you who showed great concern and courage in covering, in particular, the Visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Holy Land, as well as the sad events of Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the last weeks.

At the end of the year 2014, in reflecting on these events, I find myself identifying in some ways, with the words of Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

### **“The best of times”**

One of “the best of times” for me in the past year was the pilgrimage of the Holy Father to the Holy Land. It was successful on the pastoral and ecumenical level. His visit was followed by the beautiful prayer meeting in the Vatican gardens with President Abbas, former President Peres and Patriarch Bartolomew. Even though we did not obtain any concrete result from that meeting, however, every prayer is valid and the fruits may come much later, like the olive tree, planted on that occasion and which may produce fruits many years ahead.

It is always a great joy and privilege for me to ordain men to the sacred priesthood. This year, nine were ordained. We sent two of them to serve our faithful in the Diaspora: in the Arab Emirates and California.

The Synod on the Family, which convened in October in Rome, presented the opportunity to deal with the many challenges families face. It was one occasion that called for authentic wisdom and hope. The Synod reaffirmed the unity and indissolubility of the marriage institution. If there is progress to be made, it will be on the level of pastoral care toward separated couples and couples who entered into a second marriage. In this Holy Land, our main problem is on another level. Many families suffer from lack of legal documents for a couple to be able to live together when the marriage is between one Palestinian and a non-Palestinian. It is difficult, then, to obtain a visa or resident’s status for the non-Palestinian. Here we ask the Israeli government to ease the present restrictions on family reunification. We heard last week that more than 593 cases family reunification were accepted. This is a positive step that we thank for but it is far away from being enough for the big needs.

We felt a great joy these past days, when the Holy Father signed a decree for the canonization of two Palestinian saints. They will be officially canonized in Rome in the coming summer. A large number of faithful will go to Rome on that occasion. Canonization is the supreme honor granted to a faithful who lived according to his or her faith, who is a model for other faithful and has a highly favored intercession. The first is Blessed Myriam Bawardi, originally from Ibillin in the Upper Galilee and foundress of the Carmel Monastery in Bethlehem. The second is Blessed Marie Alphonsine Ghattas, born in the Old City of Jerusalem and co-foundress of the Sisters of the Rosary congregation. Both saints are a source of hope for the future. We rely on their intercession for peace in the Holy Land.

### **“The worst of times”**

Some of “the worst of times” over the year were seen in an intensification of violence and subsequent hostile reactions. The devastating war and accompanying bloodshed in Gaza, being the most shattering of all. In the past six years, Gaza has suffered three consecutive wars, thousands of people have been killed, hundreds of thousands are wounded, and an aftermath of destruction and despair... Great are the responsibilities of political leaders – Israeli and Palestinian – to find and facilitate a solution. Great too is the responsibility of the international community to help these two parties to help themselves...

We condemn the Gaza war and deplore its dramatic consequences: killing and destruction; but at the same time, we condemn any category of violence and retaliation against innocent people such as the killing of people praying in a synagogue and attacks against mosques. In one week, the Christian leaders of the Holy Land visited Har Nof synagogue to condemn the inhuman act that took place there, and at the same time visited Al Aksa Mosque to ask for the old Statu Quo to be respected. Unfortunately, our beloved Holy City of Jerusalem has been flowing with blood and tears. We do not want any religious antagonism in the Holy City whose vocation is to be the city of peace and interreligious coexistence.

During pastoral visits to our parishes, we could feel, touch and experience the tragedy of the many refugees from Syria and Iraq: families who lost homes, work, loved ones and relatives. It is heartbreaking to see the children running in the dust of the camp, without any goal and direction in life. Alongside the inhuman tragedy that is covering the Middle East with blood, and tearing it apart, we are all surprised that young people from Europe embrace radical ideologies and join the fight in Syria and Iraq. From another side, we are witnesses of a clearer condemnation, by Arab and Muslim leaders, of that radical religious ideology.

Last week, the Catholic Assembly of the Bishops of the Holy Land issued a statement concerning the Cremisan Valley case. We hope that the Israeli High court will keep the 300 hectares of Cremisan Valley, as well as the two Salesian monasteries on the Palestinian side. Today we are anxious because the last developments of the recent hearing are giving a different signal. We are afraid that the Court might decide that the land belonging to 58 Palestinian Christian families, might be separated from Beit Jala. Such a decision will harm our community and we hope that the judges be inspired by ethical principles and not to submit to political pressure.

### **Conclusion:**

In all our troubles and suffering, we remember with gratitude the solidarity of many people, organizations, institutions and States, who have come to our aid through many ways and means. The celebration of the Birth of Jesus promises mercy, love, and peace to countless people in their suffering and tribulation; to people who see their lives shattered and their efforts broken in the tumultuous strife and hatred of our stormy days.

For our faithful of the Holy Land, our friends around the world and our beloved pilgrims, I wish you all a blessed Christmas and a new year full of peace and good health.



## PATRIARCHS AND HEADS OF LOCAL CHURCHES IN JERUSALEM

### Arson at Tabgah : The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem

June 19, 2015



The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem condemn the act of desecration and vandalism of the Benedictine Monastery of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes on the Sea of Galilee (Tabgha) on Thursday, June 18, 2015. A fire set caused a severe damage to the Church's study and other parts of the Church compound, as well as a hateful graffiti in Hebrew on a nearby wall.

We call upon the Israeli authorities to act immediately in order to bring those responsible for this horrific attack to justice. Also, to fight this phenomena that has become epidemic in our society. This is not the first time this Holy Place gets vandalized by religiously motivated extremist groups. This is a criminal and outrageous act that should be strongly condemned by all people of faith and goodwill. No religion should accept or tolerate such an evil and inhuman behaviour.

We renew our call upon all people of this land to join hands in facing these kinds of provocative and insulting actions, and to find ways to defeat all acts of violence and desecration that bring about enmity and alienation of the people of God in this Holy Land. At the same time, we thank all our friends who condemned strongly

this action and have shown impressive solidarity with Christian churches.

#### Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem

+Patriarch Theophilos III, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate  
+Patriarch Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarchate  
+Patriarch Nourhan Manougian, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate  
+Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, ofm, Custos of the Holy Land  
+Archbishop Anba Abraham, Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate  
+Archbishop Swerios Malki Murad, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate  
+Archbishop Aba Embakob, Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate

+Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Greek-Melkite-Catholic Patriarchate  
+Archbishop Mosa El-Hage, Maronite Patriarchal Exarchate  
+Archbishop Suheil Dawani, Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East  
+Bishop Munib Younan, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land  
+Bishop Pierre Malki, Syrian Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate  
+Msgr. Georges Dankaye', Armenian Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate

## Two Saints of Palestine:

**“remain in God and His love, to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus”**



**Rome/Jerusalem/Bethlehem – Sunday, May 17, 2015.**

*These past days, a great joy filled the three holiest cities of Christianity: Bethlehem where Christ was born, Jerusalem where He was crucified and resurrected, and Rome where the two greatest apostles of the Gospel, Saint Peter and Saint Paul were martyred. It is the joy of the canonization of two Arab and Palestinian nuns, both great yet very humble, both foundresses and mystical.*

This is the Land which the Father has chosen to bestow salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. On this very land, He has sown the grace of Holiness, as a reminder that this land, torn apart by hatred and war, is still a good land. A message of hope for what remains of Christians in this Land of Christ. And it is this hope that the faithful celebrated these past two weeks, to give thanks to God and express their desire to follow these two new Saints on the path of Holiness.

Throughout the Diocese, celebrations have been organized, including those held at the Carmel of Bethlehem, and the Convent of the Sisters of the Rosary at Mamilla in Jerusalem.

At the Carmel of Bethlehem, a prayer vigil was held on Saturday evening, where the faithful came in large numbers. During two hours of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the faithful followed one another to put on the mantle of prayer of the new Carmelite saint, imploring graces for themselves, for parents, for friends. There was continuous singing as animated by the dynamic choir of the Bethlehem parish. A vigil of prayer and praise, of simplicity, meditation and the sobriety of the Carmel.

From behind their grille, in silence and contemplation, but with much love and radiant faces, the Carmelites of Bethlehem participated in the vigil. They all celebrated the sainthood of the one who wanted to be called “the little nothing”, whom God has raised high.

In Jerusalem, a momentous vigil started on Saturday at 6:00 pm, opening the “Marathon of Sainthood” for



24 hours of prayer. Groups from several parishes and communities in the Holy Land, in succession, joyfully animated the vigil during the night, in prayer, in praise and thanksgiving, next to the relics of Mother Marie-Alphonsine, who was canonized on Sunday in Rome. It was a great joy for the Sisters of the Rosary, who, since the death of their hidden foundress, serve the Church of Jerusalem as well as all the children of God throughout the Arab world, with fidelity and devotion.

In Rome as well, an animated prayer vigil was

held at the Dominican Basilica of Santa Sabina. Hundreds of Palestinian and Arab Christians came to the Rome from the four corners of the world to be present for this occasion.

On Sunday morning, May 17, 2015, the Patriarch, Auxiliary & Emeritus Bishops of the Latin Patriarchate and several other bishops of the Holy Land, diocesan clergy, nuns, seminarians and faithful converged at Saint Peter's Square and participated in the Pontifical Mass of Canonization celebrated by Pope Francis.

In his homily the Holy Father reminded the faithful that the message of saints is primarily, *"to abide in God and in his love, and thus to proclaim by our words and our lives the resurrection of Jesus."* Referring to the new Palestinian saints, he carried on: *"An essential aspect of witness to the risen Lord is unity among ourselves, his disciples, in the image of his own unity with the Father. Today too, in the Gospel, we heard Jesus' prayer on the eve of his passion: "that they may be one, even as we are one" (Jn 17:11). From this eternal love between the Father and the Son, poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5), our mission and our fraternal communion draw strength; this love is the ever-flowing source of our joy in following the Lord along the path of his poverty, his virginity and his obedience; and this same love calls us to cultivate contemplative prayer. Sister Mariam Baouardy experienced this in an outstanding way. Poor and uneducated, she was able to counsel others and provide theological explanations with extreme clarity, the fruit of her constant converse with the Holy Spirit. Her docility to the Holy Spirit made her also a means of encounter and fellowship with the Muslim world. So too, Sister Marie Alphonsine Danil Ghattas came to understand clearly what it means to radiate the love of God in the apostolate, and to be a witness to meekness and unity. She shows us the importance of becoming responsible for one another, of living lives of service one to another."*

The celebrations then continued in the streets of Rome as Palestinian, Jordanian and Lebanese flags waved in the joy of the Christians of the Middle East for the canonization of two daughters of the Holy land.

On Monday, May 18, a Thanksgiving Mass was celebrated at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, led by His Beatitude Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem with Bishops and priests of the of the Holy Land concelebrating, and attended by many men and women religious and faithful.



In his homily, Patriarch Twal explained the meaning of canonization, saying that the : *"canonization of these two nuns is at the same time a blessing, a challenge and a hope for us all. It is a blessing that tells us that God guides the path of the Christian community in our country, making it fruitful and alive by holiness. It is a challenge for us, for it calls us to rise up to the level of their holiness by the grace of God. It is also a hope in these difficult moments and circumstances which overwhelm our country in these days, for our people and our faithful, reminding us that the last word in our life and our history belongs to God"*.

The celebrations of this historic event for the Church of the Holy Land did not end there: Thanksgiving Masses will be held in the Holy Land and Jordan, according to previously announced program.

We present our wishes to the universal Church, the Church of Jerusalem and all of Palestine and the Middle East Christians, so that filled with the message of Hope, of Faith and of Love spread in the Holy Land, two thousand years after the Incarnation of the Sun of Justice, the message of Jesus Christ who is glorified by his Saints, together with the Father and His Spirit.

**Firas Abedrabbo (www.lpj.org)**

## Christians in Israel and in the Middle East, our present and future

*New Trends of Research on PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN ISRAEL at the Harry S. Truman Institute, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Conference. 19-20 January 2015*

**+Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch Emeritus**

### 1. Who we are?



We are Christians here in Israel and at the same time we are Christians in the Middle East. We are four families of Churches, all, except one, the Assyrian Church of the East, gathered in the Middle East Council of Churches, with its seat in Beirut, Lebanon. The four families are the Orthodox family (Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Cyprus), the Eastern family (Copts of Alexandria, Syrians of Antioch, and Armenians of Cilicia with their see in Antelias in Lebanon; the Armenians of Jerusalem, refer to Etchmiadzin in Armenia), the Catholic family, with seven patriarchates (Alexandria, the Copts; Antioch, the Greek Catholics, the Syro-Catholics and the Maronites;

Baghdad, the Chaldeans; Lebanon (Bzummar), the Armenians; and Jerusalem, the Roman Catholics or Latins). In 1990, the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East was established, with its seat in Beirut. The World Council of Churches (WCC), was created in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it gathers together almost all the world Churches, including the three families of Churches in the Middle East: Orthodox, Eastern and Protestant or Evangelical. The Catholic Church is not a member, but cooperates in many fields with the Council.

Church and ethnicity: one notes in the names of the Churches of the Middle East, the ethnic/linguistic root of each one of them: Greek, Copt, Syrian, Chaldean, Assyrian, Armenian, Latin or Roman. The name can denote the use of the language of prayer, like Latin (or Roman), while an ethnic sense has remained for some and disappeared for many others: thus the Roman Catholic (Latin) faithful, here and in the region, see themselves as Arabs. The Greek Orthodox are not necessarily ethnically Greek: the hierarchy has remained so in Jerusalem and Alexandria but the faithful underline their Arab belonging, and in Antioch the hierarchy is Arab since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This sense of belonging to the Arab world characterizes the Greek Catholic Church too. The Copts in Egypt kept the language only in liturgy, strongly reintroduced by Popes Kirill VI and Shenouda III to promote a sense of separate identity because the Church was almost completely Arabized for centuries. They feel that they belong to the Arab world, but they also have a sense of being different. The Syriac tradition Churches (Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean and Assyrian), have preserved the Syriac language in varying degrees in the liturgy and, in some areas, at home too, but alongside Arabic. Some according to time and place, have promoted the sense of being a non-Arab people, belonging to the Arab world.

What needs to be remembered is the Christian contribution to Muslim Arab society. During the period of the Caliphate, Christians played an active and constructive role: they translated Greek culture into Arabic and were a main motor of cultural development. Within the Arab awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even now, Christians have had an important role, even before being joined by Muslims. In this awakening, Christians, often influenced by the French Revolution, tried to define relations between state and religion. Many of the founders of modern political parties were Christians and their aim was to establish a kind of secular society, in which all citizens were equal and not discriminated against because of their religion. The secularist Baath party succeeded in taking power in Syria and Iraq, creating a degree of security for Christians and other minorities, instituting a separation between religion and state, even if it could not totally disregard Islam. However, neither could it implement democracy; it established rather dictatorial regimes.

## 2. Christians in Israel and Palestine: The leaders of the Churches.



Here in Israel and Palestine, the four families of Churches are present: the Orthodox (Greek, Russian and Rumanian), the Eastern (Armenian, Coptic, Syrian and Ethiopian), the Catholic (Greek, Roman Catholic or Latin, Maronite, Syrian, Armenian and Chaldean) and the Protestants (Lutherans and Anglicans, and other denominations). We are diverse, that means we have different liturgies rooted in different languages. We are hierarchically divided, autonomous from one another. Altogether we are a small community, about 2% of the population in Israel and Palestine. To this enumeration, we must add the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land,

Custodians of the Holy Places for the universal Catholic Church.

Although we are diverse and hierarchically divided, most of the time we enjoy good relations. We have common meetings in order to deal with questions concerning the religious, social and political life of our people. Our main feasts, Christmas and Easter, follow two different calendars nevertheless we have a long tradition of exchanging wishes and visiting each other on these occasions.

When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which we are living, the faithful expect the Church to speak out for justice and the advocacy of rights, and our duty is to raise our voice. Sometimes, it is difficult to reach a consensus in this field, because of the concept of the relationship between Church and politics, and because of various pressures from the political authorities. It is easier to send a strong clear message about what is happening in Syria and Iraq than about what is happening in Jerusalem.

Some of us would insist: intervening in the political situation in order to say clearly who is the oppressed, who is the oppressor, to raise our voice to give a strong message to both parties is simply a human right and religious obligation, even when it enrages the political establishment. Others might say: what is related to the conflict is politics and we, as Church, should stay out of it. Hence the statements of the Church, when they are published, are often very mild and say little if anything at all. The political authorities, for their part, tell us: the conflict, the occupation, all that, is politics, and you, religious leaders, keep away from it, speak about peace, pray for peace, and remain distant and quiet, busy with your prayers and incense.

Therefore the question for all of us is: What kind of approach should we adopt as religious leaders regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine? A second question is: what should be the relationship between the Church and the state? Should we take a stand regarding the oppressed and the oppressor or should we keep silent? A Christian religious leader has to be on the side of the poor, the oppressed. Doing so, he is not forcibly antagonistic to the other party. He should not be against anyone. He is pro-human and pro-life and cares about the good of both parties. But when one is oppressed he has to say this one is oppressed, and this oppression must end. As the Second Vatican Council states:

*The Council wishes passionately to summon Christians to cooperate, under the help of Christ the author of peace, with all men in securing among themselves a peace based on justice and love and in setting up the instruments of peace (Gaudium et Spes, 77).*

## 3. Christians in Israel, the people

First, a basic Christian principal is the universality of vision: if I am suffering, I am not suffering alone. All those with whom I live are in the same situation of conflict and war, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Therefore, in looking for an end to my sufferings, I have to care for all those who suffer around me, whatever their nationality or religion might be.

A second principle is loyalty to oneself and one's people. Hence, for the indigenous Christians in Israel, what is at stake is not simply a question of Christian-Israeli relations, but rather the general relation between Israelis and Palestinians. Indigenous Christians are Palestinians and Arabs (except for a small group that is Hebrew speaking). So we are both part of the conflict and part of the efforts to make peace. We are a part of those under occupation and a part of those suffering discrimination. Hence, the Christian Palestinian's attitude is both Palestinian and Christian (demanding freedom, an end to the occupation, equality...) characterized by the Christian spirit and way.



Two different situations are to be distinguished, concerning Christian Palestinians in Israel. The first is in the Occupied Territories, the second, inside Israel. In the Occupied Territories, Christians are under military occupation, dominated by a regime of checkpoints and other difficulties of daily life. The Christian's contribution is that of any citizen who finds himself in a similar situation: to take all legitimate measures to put an end to this occupation and to attain independence and freedom. The legitimate measures, of course, must be in harmony with the principles of Christian faith and Church teaching, the basic commandment being of love.

Inside Israel, Christian Palestinians are citizens. They have the duties and should have the rights of citizens. They should be loyal to the state but also loyal to themselves: demanding equality and an end to all discrimination. One aspect of their loyalty to Israel can be expressed as a determination to help Israel rid itself of its "problem" with the Palestinians, by ending the occupation.

Inside Israel, Christians are faced with another issue, that of personal security. Christians inside Israel feel insecure. Inter-Palestinian crimes are rarely followed up, though the guilty parties are often well known. In many cases, the police do not respond to complaints. And when tensions arise between Christians and Muslims, between Druze and Muslims or between Druze and Christians, the police often do not act. We might raise the question: do the police have their own agenda? Are the authorities, in fact, promoting a "divide and rule" policy, even sometimes actively promoting these tensions?

Inside Palestinian society in Israel, whether Muslim, Christian or Druze, those who feel protected are those who have their own guns. Those who are armed are usually agents of the government, whether Muslims, Christians or Druze.



A new Christian issue has been raised inside Israel: there are voices among Christians, encouraged by the authorities, who have begun to say "we are not Arabs, we are Arameans". Where does this imaginative discourse come from? Perhaps it has its roots in an imagined past: it is true that some of us, Christians, spoke Aramaic, centuries ago, like the Jews. However, history has been ongoing and has transformed situations and peoples. Today, we are what we are: Palestinians,

Arabs and Christians. Resurrecting some distant past does not automatically separate one from his or her people. When one is faced by a difficult present, it is not always healthy to escape into a "mythical" past and bury oneself in it. It is usually best to face the present challenges and to help others to face these challenges.



On the other hand, I would say to a Christian Palestinian who now claims to be Aramean and not Arab: If you want to express a special loyalty to Israel, start being loyal to yourself. If you are not loyal to yourself you will be loyal to no one. I do not think, this "flight of imagination" will be of any help to Israel. Loyalty does not mean providing Israel with more soldiers in the army or more collaborators in society. It is no help to the Christians, even if some of them will profit as individuals, getting jobs, admissions to universities and so on. This "flight of imagination" is rather an added element of confusion and internal dissention, inside Israel and among the Christian Palestinian Israeli citizens.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land in a statement published on September 18, 2014, said: "The vocation of the Christian is not to suddenly become an Aramean nor to go to war. Rather the vocation of the Christian is to point the way to peace and to walk in its path. This peace must be built on the dignity of each human being, Palestinian and Jewish. Blessed are the peace makers for they truly serve God and humanity, all humanity, Palestinians and Israelis and the whole region".

#### 4. Christians in the Middle-East

If I now widen the perspective, I will apply the same principles to my vision of Christians throughout the Middle East. In the region, there are so many suffering: we are not alone in our suffering. Many more are suffering with us.

The Catholic Patriarchs of the East had already perceived this communion with the human person in the region. In their second Pastoral Letter, published in 1992, echoed again in their tenth Pastoral Letter in 2009, they said: "The whole society is affected by the Arab socio-political failure. Christians too, because they do not live separated from their societies. Like the others, perhaps more than the others, they are affected by the conflicts that exist in the region. They are even the first victims, as it appears from the present situation in Israel and Iraq (Revolutions in 2011 had not still expanded to all the Arab countries). Therefore, all the society, Muslims and Christians, are living in perplexity..." (n. 8).

The Christian presence in the Middle East is first an internal question: How Christians understand themselves and their role in their societies, and their relations with Muslims, and here, with Jews. Second, it is an external question that depends on the West's global political view and planning for the region.

How do we understand ourselves, what is the reality of ethnic differences that have survived up until today in some countries? A Christian belongs to his people, to his country and to his society, just as every human being in each one's country and society. We constitute a small number, but we are not minorities in the sense of being a foreign element in our countries. And we say: we are not numbers, neither are we proportions, we are human beings one hundred per cent. Each one is a creature of God, just like everyone else in the country, Muslim, Jew, Druze or Christian. We belong to our people, whatever the behavior of our people might be, welcoming or persecuting as it happens to be now in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, as Christians, we are sent to our people: we are bearers of a mission, we have a message to our people, to adhere to its identity, and to contribute to the building up and defense of our society, in all circumstances, easy or difficult, as it is at present. Jesus told us: you are the salt, the light in your societies. That means we have to bring to our public life a taste of living, our Christian values and ways.

Christians do not necessarily agree on any one particular ideal position. This is a reality. But we have to educate our Christians in this vision and spirit. Whatever be the behavior of our society, our behavior as Christians will be involvement in all its events and evolutions. Central to us as Christians is to be always insistent on our commandment: love each other, your neighbors and even your enemies.

### How do our societies deal with us?

The issue is twofold. Firstly, within each country, it is an issue of achieving total equality, difficult to attain, as long as the population is perceived as being made up of Muslims and Christians. The state is obligated to take religion into consideration. Secondly, today, with ongoing revolution, a process that began in January 2011, we are facing the threatening progress of Islamic militias (like ISIS) and their like who have already had an effect on the Christians in Syria and Iraq: massacres and forced emigration.



Second, the Christian presence in the Middle East is an external question that depends on the West's global political view and planning for the region. This means that Christian presence ultimately will depend on the Western powers and their planning for the region. Christians do not seem to exist within this planning by Western powers. Their criteria seem to be only political and economic interests, and we, Christians, are of no interest to them, neither in politics nor in economy, not when declaring wars nor when provoking violent changes of regime, as was the case in the invasion of Iraq. In these cases, if we, Christians, survive, it is OK. If we are massacred, there are voices of compassion. If we become refugees, the Western powers might send us humanitarian help, they maintain refugee camps, or even give us entry visas for emigration. But their "realpolitik" does not change. This is a main danger for our future as Christians in the region.

As for the relations between Muslims and Christians, they are not only a challenge for us, they are our mission, and we will continue to engage in this mission, as our ancestors always have, ever since the times of the first Caliphates and right until the modern Arab awakening.

### 5. Our future



Our future here, as Christians in Israel and Palestine, depends upon the future of Israel and Palestine. If stability can be achieved, it will be stability and prosperity for all, Christians included. If war continues, it will be instability, social and economic for Christians as well as for all. It will remain a period of confusion due to war, politic interests, poverty, need for jobs, for equality of opportunities, education etc... it will be a period of insecurity, physical and moral, the human person will be used and abused for "security reasons". For those of us who want just to live, without any ideal, it will be a time of desperation and slow death, whether we are called "Christians" or "Arameans".

Keeping in mind all those external factors, local and international, we have mentioned and the socio-political evolution of the region, our future as Christians depends ultimately on ourselves, on our own faith. The 10<sup>th</sup> Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East states: "The future of the Christians of the East is in the hands of God and in their own hands. It is in their hands in the measure in which their faith becomes a spiritual strength within themselves, with which they face challenges, take necessary steps and contribute to the common effort of building".

Our future is a question of our role in our societies, it is a question of our relations with Muslims. It is a question of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. It is a question of the Western powers' planning for the region... However, it is mainly a question of faith. Without faith we will be a question of simply another minority, and a struggle between small numbers and large numbers, while we remain at the mercy of savage egoistical forces swirling around us.

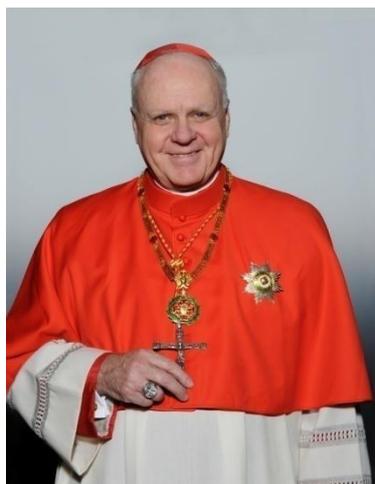
If it is a question of faith this means that we have a mission, we are a mission, wherever we are, in all circumstances, easy and less easy, peace and war. With faith, with our sense of being a people with a mission, we are strong, strong not to kill or to be aggressive against anyone, but to better love and contribute to the general human building of a fraternal society, in which everyone finds himself as a brother or sister. If we are faced by death and massacres, we have to educate ourselves to live the sense of being a martyr: giving our life for the life of our societies, even for those who kill us, so that even these may also reach the true sense of life. This might seem to be too idealistic, but, it has to be so, facing the hard realities of our days which might become worse day to day. In a normal situation, where we are not faced directly by death and persecution, our choice is our vocation: to share in the building of our society. In exceptional situation, where we are faced directly by death, we have two choices: to become soldiers and form armies to kill some of our enemies and to be killed for politics, on the one hand, or to give our life as martyrs for our faith and for the life of our own enemy, on the other hand. The second alone is the Christian choice. It was the choice of the first Christians here in Jerusalem, in the Middle East and in the entire Roman Empire. They died for their faith and for the life of their persecutors, and finally they won.

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## Pope Francis Faces Unique Situation in Holy Land

### Grand Master of Equestrian Order Tells ZENIT No One Better than Francis to Obtain Good Results

Vatican City, May 23, 2014 (ZENIT.org) Deborah Castellano Lubov



*Cardinal O'Brien, whose Order is committed to preserving and supporting the people and monuments where Jesus had lived, explains why he believes no other pope will have faced what Pope Francis is facing now. In this interview, the New York-born cardinal also explains why he considers the king of Jordan to be a hero, that monuments are threatened to become museums if action is not taken, why it's wrong to put under "lock and key God's good people" in order to assure 100 percent security.*

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### ZENIT: For those who are not familiar with the Equestrian Order could you please explain what it does?

**Cardinal O'Brien:** The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem has its roots in the Crusades and was formally organized, appointed in the mid-19th Century. Rather than being groups here and there, we became one papal order, I think in 1846. From the Crusades to this present day, the title has always been a concern for the faith in the Holy Land: to preserve the faith, to support those who are keeping the faith, and to keep alive those monuments of the faith, such as those we find in the Holy Sepulcher, in the Cenacle, and

those sacred places that are still alive with the faith, which threaten to become museums, unless the Catholic and Christian world take an active role in supporting them.

**ZENIT: What do you think is the biggest threat related to the holy site?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** The biggest threat would be vandalism both on the Israeli side and from the Muslim side. There are extremists on both sides, but are very small in number, but boy can they create havoc.

I think everyone involved in forming the goals which are ours--and it's not just Catholic goals, it's Christians across the board and other faiths--realize that they must be more deeply involved in supporting the people, the places, and the causes that are so vital to the preservation of a 2,000 year history.

**ZENIT: What does the Equestrian Order do in order to support pilgrims, and, in this case, one in particular, Pope Francis?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** The Order has 30,000 members in 35 different countries, knights and ladies, or knights and dames. Our primary purpose as a papal order is to grow in love of Christ and for the things of Christ, and to do what we can to encourage the faith and the faithful in the Holy Land to remain strong and to grow. As you know, there's been a great exodus out of the Holy Land in the last 20, 25 years. It's our hope that our charities and financial assistance--as our order gives \$13 million dollars a year to the patriarch of Jerusalem--will help to keep our schools, parishes, health centers, and seminaries open. We hope that not just Catholics, but Christians of all colors and all brands remain, rather than flee in fear from that culture which is so thoroughly rich with our Christian traditions.

**ZENIT: What should be done about this mass exodus?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** I hope the Israeli government will realize there is an alternative from a virtually total lockdown of the Palestinian people and, what they call, the West Bank or in Palestine. I think we have only 5 percent Christians in Palestine. So, this is not a personal or selfish concern on the part of Christians, but it's a question of human rights. I speak of a lockdown in which they put a 440-foot wall 30-feet high, to keep out Palestinians, to not allow them to get into Jerusalem. In many cases, they do not allow Palestinians to see their relatives or to cross into their farms without great inconvenience. I could understand the need for security, but you don't put under lock and key God's good people in order to assure 100 percent security. That's what is happening.

**ZENIT: How do you think the Pope's visit will contribute to ecumenical dialogue?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** Well, there are many elements involved in the Pope's visit. It's a narrow and tenuous tight-rope that he is going to be walking. I think the ecumenical dialogue will be easy, comparatively speaking to the political forces that will be intruding themselves during his visit. He very much would like this to be a strictly ecumenical pilgrimage of faith, but there is too much going on in that area to forbid, to prevent forces to get his attention and his support. I am sure he is very well aware of this.

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II faced huge challenges in many of their pilgrimages and visits to countries under great stress. I don't think any Pope will have faced what Pope Francis is facing now or will have undertaken the stressful and the weighty appointments and commitments that he is giving to that part of the world. It's just amazing what he has taken on himself, but given his personality, given his faith, his reputation as a man of balance and openness, I don't think there is anyone in a better position to bring us good results. It will, at least, bring better harmony and dialogue there, which is in such great need right now.

**ZENIT: What do you think Francis' biggest challenge will be during this visit?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** I think his biggest challenge will be, I suppose, to get a fair hearing, to deliver--I don't know what his message is going to be--but it certainly will be one of reason, taking into account, a very complicated historical and present political scenario, one that will try to thread the needle and to bring all sides back into a harmonious dialogue and discussion. I speak certainly not only of the ecumenical, but I think the relationship there is wonderful there between Orthodox and Catholics and Christians ... truly all

believers in Christ, I believe we have a lot going for us there. But there are other secular forces and so-called religious forces that will try to "water down" or distort his message or will try to block out his message. Yet, I don't think it's going to happen. I think he is going to do this. The prayers of the world are with him, certainly the faith and the prayers and the gratitude of Catholics and Christians are with him, and his own grace-filled sense of his role as Bishop of Rome, as Pope, as a Christian leader, are going to bring him through this. It will bring that part of the world through this with a considerably improved atmosphere and considerably improved attitude on the part of people there who are really hurting for some voice of reason.

**ZENIT: What would you consider the current status of mutual respect and religious freedom in the Holy Land?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** Well, I think there is freedom of worship and we are grateful for that. However, when the freedom to go from one boundary to another to visit relatives and friends and to get to their places of worship in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, to get to places of work as well, that freedom is very limited. I can understand the reason for those limitations and the fear on the part of the Israeli government, but I think there is room for a lot more flexibility there. As far as the relationships between the Christians and Muslims, I have been very pleased and surprised in my brief experiences there to see that the vast majority of Muslims are peace-loving and peace-keeping, and are willing and anxious to work out the problems that are facing their Christian brethren. But once again, there are extremists sometimes intent on preventing this cordial relationship from hope. I just hope that whatever steps are taken in the next week to limit the influence of the radicals will let the radicals know that there is another way to live as a just community, rather desperate elements fighting each other.



**ZENIT: In your capacity as Grand Master, what has been the biggest challenge for you personally?**

**Cardinal O'Brien:** Well, our order is founded as a papal order to support the charitable and pastoral works of the Holy Father there. We are doing that, our 30,000 members, are doing that almost heroically through the amount of help they give, not only material help, in keeping our 45 schools, our 60 parishes, our seminary going strong despite the limited numbers. Many of our lieutenancies are conducting pilgrimages each year, not only to pray, but to show solidarity with those who are struggling, Christians and others, and that's a great encouragement to them. And that's our role. We let the Holy See and all the powers that be on the secular side work out the political differences. I don't think there's any better force to do that, on our side, than the secretary of state and Pope Francis.

**ZENIT: Do you think it will be possible during a visit so short and intense to achieve this?**

*Pope Francis stops to pray at the Wall surrounding Bethlehem*

**Cardinal O'Brien:** It's a long haul. It's a good distance to travel, but we need to start somewhere, but I think that things are so broken, that at this stage, the Pope and the ecumenical patriarch are one of the last straws for improvement there. I think that it is going to work.

*Reprinted by permission of Zenit News*



The Supreme Court of Israel, with a pronouncement in many ways surprising, on Monday, July 7 gave the green light to the construction of the “separation Wall” between Israel and Palestine in the stretch that crosses the Cremisan valley, according to the intent that has always been pursued by the Israeli Ministry of Defense. This new provision contradicts the previous pronouncement, delivered by the supreme judicial body of the State of Israel, which in early April had ruled – presented as definitive after a dispute that lasted nearly eight years – the rejection of the Wall route proposed by the army and the Israeli Ministry of Defence, and invited the Israeli military authorities to find other, less devastating alternatives for the local people.

The resumption of work authorized by the Court provides only a slight variation compared to the paths of the route of the Wall previously expected. Under the new provisions, the school and the two Salesian convents that arise in the area will find themselves still in Palestinian territory, accessible from the town of Beit Jala, while the Wall will incorporate, on the Israeli side, the agricultural land of the Cremisan valley belonging to 58 Palestinian families in the area.

“We are surprised by the incredible decision of the Court that authorizes the work – says to Fides Bishop William Shomali, Patriarchal Vicar of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem – and we are trying to understand the reasons of this decision. The drastic change compared to the previous ruling may be a reaction before the recent official recognition of the State of Palestine by the Holy See. There had been no major formal reaction to that recognition. Now we feel that, as in other cases, the answer has arrived with the policy of *fait accompli*”.

The Patriarchal Vicar for the city of Jerusalem advances also other considerations: “The impression is that it had never really given up possession of those Cremisan lands, in order to have an area in which to expand the Israeli settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo, also built on land stolen from the Palestinian town of Beit Jala”.

The Cremisan valley is the main “green lung” for the population living in the Bethlehem area. The route of the separation wall built by Israel, after crossing the territory of Bethlehem, is now preparing to devastate that area, known as one of the most beautiful natural environments of the entire Holy Land. “It is clear –

stated Vera Baboun, mayor of Bethlehem in the past – that the project of the route does not respond to any need for security, and seeks only to separate people from their land to confiscate them and enlarge the area of the Israeli settlements that they already occupied most of the Palestinian territories in that quadrant”. According to Vera Baboun, the effect of the policy of Israeli expropriations in that delicate area of the Palestinian territories will be that “within a few years the whole area will be suppressed from the grip of the Wall, and Christians will be the first to leave”.



## Nordic Bishops Statement on the Cremisan

July, 2015

Together with many Bishops conferences in all the world we support the Cremisan (Bethlehem) cause: this cause is also very much valued and appreciated by the Catholics Bishops of the Holy Land.



Bethlehem 2015

In accordance with the EU Missions in Jerusalem and Ramallah we "express deep regret and concern at the decision of the Israeli Supreme Court of 6 July 2015 to allow the construction of a section of the Separation Barrier through the Cremisan Valley".

The construction of the separation barrier on occupied land is illegal, according to the advisory opinion expressed in July 2004 by the International Court of Justice. More than ten years later, will it finally be carried out?

Together we have to seek urgently justice and peace for all.

**Nordic Bishops Conference**

## Success in Removing Security Ban From Several Family Unification Cases

2015-06-29

*The Society of St. Yves is the Catholic Center for Human Rights of the Latin Patriarchate in the Holy Land. It provides legal aid to the needy, oppressed and marginalized and tries to raise the awareness of human and civil rights in the society.*

The Society of St. Yves – Catholic Center for Human Rights, represented by its lawyers Essam Odeh and Zvi Avni, succeeded in lifting the security ban in a number of cases where Israeli “security ban” policies were imposed on Palestinian citizens, with the aim of denying Palestinians their most basic human rights, including of family unification, and freedom of movement.

The first is the case of A.K, holder of a Jerusalem ID, who spent 12 years in Israeli prisons as a political prisoner. Upon his release, A.K came back to live with his wife and six children in their family house, located on the Israeli side of the separation wall, 150m from Hizma checkpoint. A.K was denied from living with his family due to “security ban” which was imposed on him since 2010, regardless of the fact that he was the main supporter of two disabled family members, and the difficult conditions he faces. As a result A.K was obliged to live separated from his family and he was also deprived the right to be present at the birth of his youngest daughter. Only after Adv. Zvi Avni brought A.K’s case to court, A.K was authorized to pass through Hizma checkpoint; he is now reunited with his family and lives with them without the disruption of the separation wall.



The second case is of the Jerusalemite woman S.J, who suffers from difficult health conditions and kidney failure. She applied for family unification for her husband, holder of a Palestinian ID. Israeli authorities rejected her application several times, once again on “security” grounds. More precisely, she was denied family unification due to the involvement of their children in organizations considered as “terrorist” by Israeli Authorities. As a result to the continuous rejections, St. Yves’ lawyer, Adv. Essam Odeh, appealed S.J’s case to the court, which eventually

decided that the Israeli Ministry of Interior will cancel the rejection of her application, and allow S.J to apply for family unification again.

The last case belongs to the Jerusalemite citizen W.S., a woman who holds a Jerusalem ID married her husband S.S who holds a Palestinian ID. She applied for family unification for her husband several times, all to no avail. Her applications were turned down by the Israeli authorities for same security reasons; this time due to the involvement of her brothers’ in-law in organizations qualified as “terrorist” by the Israeli occupation. St. Yves, represented by Adv. Essam Odeh, appealed this decision before court. The appeal was initially rejected. However, after a long legal battle, the Israeli ministry of Interior readjusted its decision and accepted the family unification application from W.S.

It is noteworthy that the Israeli Knesset has recently renewed the freeze of the family unification law for the 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. Israeli Authorities use both “security ban” and discriminatory family unification policies, along with the legal framework that governs it, to deny the right of family unification to thousands of Palestinian families, of which one partner is a Jerusalemite or a Palestinian holding a Jerusalem ID, and the other is not. These Israeli policies cause enormous distress and suffering to these families, and deteriorate the living conditions of the Palestinian population of Jerusalem on a large scale.

## “To Love and Serve: a Knight and Lady in the Holy Land”



**HOLY LAND** – Interview with Carola and Henrique Abreu – volunteers of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem since February 2014, and Members of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem.

**1) When and how did you get to the Holy Land? Why have you decided to dedicate this time of your life to the local Church? What is your motivation?**

We moved to Jerusalem in February 2014, accepting the invitation from His Beatitude Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal, and Bishop

William Shomali, to join the LPJ on its mission to love and to serve the Mother Church and the Christians of the Holy Land. We have been traveling to the Holy Land for the last five years, and after deep and “in loco” understanding the mission of the Catholic Church in the Middle East, as well as their true needs and challenges; we decided to devote some years of our lives to volunteer service to the Church and to the Christian communities. Our main motivation has always been service to others and charitable spirit. Due to the nature of our professional lives, we had to change countries and cultures several times, but we always allowed time for our volunteer work, and to provide assistance to institutions and individuals requiring our support. During this time of great need for the Church, we received an important spiritual call, and decided to leave behind, our country, our lives, families, friends, material possessions; in favor of true happiness, which for us has been, to love and serve the Church and our most needy fellow Christians.

**2) What is your mission?**

Our mission is to serve the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its projects and needs in the Holy Land. In 2014 we have three lines of work in our mission:

a) We work together with the media department of the LPJ, with translations for the webpage and documents in Spanish and Portuguese.

b) This year we are also dedicated to the projects of the Taybeh Parish, in Palestine. Recently, we successfully completed the first project that was the “Ecumenical Summer Camp”, in which we had both the privilege of sponsoring and working on. This project directly benefited 264 children and 70 leaders (even during the war in Gaza) they enjoyed four weeks of intense cultural, religious, sports and leisure activities. This year, we still have two more projects to go: the reform of an old typical Palestinian house-museum



(House of Parable) and the Youth Center of the parish; both benefiting the pilgrims as well as the parishioners. In addition to the projects, we also work at the Elderly Home of Beit Afram, and at the parish with Fr. Aziz Halawe, in routine activities, such as welcoming groups of pilgrims who come to Taybeh, sharing with them the story of the village, the Christian situation in Palestine and the importance of helping the communities in need.

c) In our free time, we try to put on our agenda, the

visit to parishes that we have not been before, the hospitals and homes for disabled children, as the Sisters of the Incarnate Word in Bethlehem, Mother Teresa of Calcutta in Nablus, among others.

### **3) How does your mission relate to the Order of the Holy Sepulcher?**

As Knight and Lady of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, we carry with us a great weight and responsibility to support the Holy Land, as the main objective of the Order is to serve, protect, maintain, and support the projects and works of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Christian community. We have traveled through Jordan, Israel and Palestine in recent years, and had the privilege to visit many parishes and to learn the great and often heroic work that our priests are displaying, often facing many difficulties and challenges. Throughout this period, we had the joy and grace of supporting some initiatives in Kerak and Ader in Jordan and Beit Sahour in Palestine. Our divine call is to work in the Holy Land, offering our professional and personal experiences, at the service of Mother Church.

### **4) The situation in the country is difficult and complicated. How one can help the Christians of the Holy Land?**



The Christians in the Holy Land this year are facing and living a really hard time with the War in Gaza, and the terrible persecution of our brothers and sisters in Iraq, Syria, and many other places. We believe that in a time of so much trouble, desolation and despair; the most important thing is to show the Christians that they are not alone, and that we are here to help, support accompany and to love them.

We started a small and private campaign to support families of Gaza in our countries of origin, and luckily we were able to get some help to them. We also maintain regular visits until today to St. Joseph Hospital in Jerusalem, where some of the most severe victims are still in treatment. The visitation of patients is of great importance, extending a helping hand or a hug of affection and solidarity to those who are suffering in a hospital bed.

We believe in the great power of prayer and faith. This is a time when Christians around the world must unite in prayer for the Holy Land, and particularly for the helpless victims of war and persecution. In addition to the prayers, it is necessary more than ever, that the international Christian community joins efforts to firmly help the less than 2% Christians left in the Holy Land, through reconstruction, social, humanitarian, housing and educational projects; maintaining and supporting the Church in the land where our Lord Jesus Christ was born, lived, died and resurrected for us all.

*Interview by Myriam Ambroselli, Director of the Media Office at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem*

## “Childhood Interrupted: Child Registration in Jerusalem”

*Christians in Holy Land: official website of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land for the visit of Pope Francis in the Holy Land. Nov 21, 2014*



JERUSALEM – On the 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2014 a conference was held on Children’s Rights in Jerusalem, attended by some jurists and specialists. The issue of civil registration of Palestinian children in Jerusalem and the impossibility for them to get, like their parents, a “permanent residence” or an identity card was raised. An issue linked to the larger issue of family reunion.

That was the theme of the conference organized by St Yves Society – the legal association affiliated to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem – in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Jerusalem. The conference took place at the Pontifical Center Notre Dame of Jerusalem. After two short welcoming speeches, made by the Head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Jerusalem, and the Director of St Yves Society, Mr. Raffoul Roffa, His Beatitude Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah spoke about the “crises of justice” which affect the Holy Land since many years. He talked then about the issue of children registration.

For the Palestinian Patriarch, born in Nazareth before the creation of the State of Israel, the “issue of child registration is one facet of a wider issue: that of family reunion. The family is at the heart of all that, and therefore the issue is both natural and human. A family means a father, a mother and children who live together under one roof. But here, under very particular circumstances, Israeli laws issue regulations which do not allow a family to live under the same roof! For them that seems normal, although it contradicts Natural Law. Positive law should not contradict with Natural and Divine law, which God himself has granted, in harmony with Man’s nature – otherwise Man becomes victim of the law.”

Referring to the present alarming situation, the Patriarch-Emeritus repeated what has been often his conviction: “any ruler should all the time ask himself why explosions burst so often? He will find an answer when he listens to his conscience. The fault is not in the reaction, but in what causes the reaction. Knowing this, serves the interest of Israel. In order for the Israeli to enjoy security, the Palestinian should also be able to enjoy security. Peace for everybody is when each individual recognizes Humanity in himself: when he is neither aggressor nor aggressed”.

Next was the turn of Bassem Khoury, Board Member of St-Yves Society, who was also the moderator of the conference. He arrived late, because of the check-points between Ramallah and Jerusalem in these last days when Israelis are stiffening their security measures. In his introduction, and referring to the painful realities, Khoury wondered: “Is justice nowadays for power, or is power for justice?” He pointed out that “refusing to register children is a sort of ethnic cleansing” from the side of Israel, and that is indeed a “war crime according to International Law”. Palestinians hold in their hands today an “atomic bomb”, according to the Palestinian intellectual. This “bomb” is their right to join, as from now on, international associations and treaties, especially the Treaty of Rome which will protect them from any Israeli aggression in the future. A protection based on justice and law.

This speech was followed by a witness given by a Moslem Palestinian woman. She is Mohammad Asfour’s grandmother. Mohammad is 7 years old, but he is still not registered on the lists of Jerusalem residents. His



father is in prison, and his mother is a Palestinian from the West Bank, who is not allowed to live in Jerusalem with her child. Mohammad lives therefor with his grandmother, but he cannot go to school, nor obtain social security, because he does not hold “an identity card nor a passport that prove his residency” in Israel. He does not have the Palestinian ID, either. According to law, this child does not exist.

Mr. Raffoul Rofa and Mr. Haitham Al Khatib, both Members of St Yves Society, spoke about the issue from a legal point of view. Mr. Rofa explained that “in 1967 Israel gave to Palestinians living in East Jerusalem a permanent residency, but not a nationality. That means

that the Israeli Minister of Interior could cancel these residencies whenever he wants, in certain cases such as the case of persons who live outside Jerusalem for a certain period of time. The children inherit, in fact, the legal status of their parents. This policy has demographic reasons. Since the beginning, Israel tries to maintain a demographic “balance” in Jerusalem, between Palestinian Arabs and Israelis. In the beginning it was fixed to 20% Arab, and 80 % Israeli. Later the percentage switched to 30% Arabs and 70 % Israelis”.

Haitham AL Khatib, who is the head of the legal department at St Yves Society, finally stated that the child who is not registered before reaching the age of 18, loses his right, even if he fulfills the required conditions later (when his father comes out of prison, for example). The future of this child, who is not registered in any record, becomes very complicated. At present, he is a resident of no country!

*Firas Abedrabbo (www.lpj.org)*

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## Statement of Christian Schools in Israel

*August 15, 2014*

Christian Schools have been offering their educational services to the children of the Holy Land, from all faiths and denominations, for hundreds of years. The churches and monasteries that own these schools have developed the school buildings and facilities and strengthened the educational and moral message based on the love of God and man. We have been categorized for decades as “Recognized and Unofficial” schools and have been partially funded by the Ministry of Education. However, the policies of the Ministry of Education in the last few years have been drying up these educational institutions. The Ministry started a systematic campaign against our schools by unilaterally cutting its support from about 45%, compared to what was before, to 29% of the total cost of a primary school. The Ministry of Education also closed the door for advancement by not allowing our primary school teachers to participate in training courses designed for teachers. They even prevented Ministry instructors from working with our teachers and thus our teachers are prevented from developing in their academic fields. Recently they have even tightened the noose around our necks with regulations limiting the percentage of tuition we can charge – this is a death strike that will prevent our schools from being able to work!

In order to stop this attack on our schools, the negotiation team that was appointed by the administrative forum of the Office of Christian Schools held intensive and long meetings with government ministries and even the Knesset. They also met with high-ranking foreign officials to explain the crisis to the local and foreign press. This work has been going on for over a year and a half and included direct negotiations with a committee from the Ministry of Education who suggested that we become “Official schools”. This suggestion was rejected. This government committee also suggested that we become “Special Schools” so that we would be able to collect higher tuition, but this will put a heavy load on the parents. We rejected that too and asked for an increase in the percentage of funding for our schools, equalizing us with other schools that are under the same category.

When we learned that these proposals would lead to an increase in school tuition, at the expense of the parents, and would hurt our educational message, we stopped the negotiations and held a warning demonstration on the 27th of May 2015 in front of the Ministry of Education building in Jerusalem in the presence of 5 bishops, tens of nuns and clergymen and 9 members of the Knesset, in addition to hundreds of parents and staff. The Ministry of Education not only held its position, it accelerated its steps in the northern region by releasing warning letters to several of our schools threatening to not allow the renewal of these schools’ licenses.

Due to the failure of the negotiations, Israeli president Mr. Reuven Rivlin initiated a meeting and invited the negotiation committee and the Minister of Education to his home on the 24th of August. The announcements after this meeting were positive and as a result, the representatives of the ministry and the Christian schools met in order to try to reach an agreement over the budgets. But these meetings failed because the proposed increase did not comply with the minimum demands of the schools and we found that their purpose was just to win time and stop all our protests.

We have seen that the proposed sum does not close the huge gap that years of cuts have created and does not stop the policies of discrimination that that we have endured for years. Therefore we have decided on a series of protest steps starting with an open strike on the 1st of September and we assure you that we have not done this lightly but only after a long study and careful thinking. We will not back off until we receive our full rights. We will also hold several protests that will accompany the strike.

We trust that our parents will understand the steps we are taking and will stand, with God’s assistance, beside their schools and institutions. We commit to compensate the students for any educational loss when this crisis is over and we look forward to the return of our students to school in the near future, by God’s grace.

“If God is with us then who can be against us.”

**The Office of Christian Schools in Israel**



*The Society of St. Yves is the Catholic Center for Human Rights of the Latin Patriarchate in the Holy Land. It provides legal aid to the needy, oppressed and marginalized and tries to raise the awareness of human and civil rights in the society. The Society of St. Yves believes that every human being is created in the image of God and the dignity and rights of everybody are God given.*



### Society of St. Yves Catholic Center for Human Rights

The Society of St. Yves – Catholic Center for Human Right, succeeded through its lawyer, adv. Ruwaida Tatour-Irsheid, in registering four Palestinian children from Jerusalem as well as obtaining a family unification residency permit for their father Mr. Bilal Salah Al-Din. This achievement comes after long years in which the family suffered from Israel's policies and restrictions on the unification of Palestinian families and the registration of Palestinian children.

Mr. Bilal who holds a Palestinian ID married Iman, holder of permanent residency, in 1999. Soon afterwards, their struggle started with the complicated family unification process which became even more problematic following Israel's ban on family unification, introduced in 2003 and still applicable today. The family further suffered in their attempts to register their four children which required tremendous efforts and burdensome bureaucratic requirements. Nevertheless, the family's attempts to register their children were met by rejection by Israel's Ministry of Interior alleging that the family could not prove that their center of life was in Jerusalem.

The family sought the help of St. Yves' lawyers, after which adv. Tatour-Irsheid filed a new application to register the children. After thorough follow up and determination, the Israeli Ministry of Interior accepted the applications and the children were granted temporary A5 residency. Adv. Tatour-Irsheid points that the children were in a risky and difficult legal situation since the oldest child was almost 14 years old when the family sought St. Yves help. The Israeli Ministry of Interior denies child registration applications for children above the age of 14 and denies them the right to obtain a permanent residency status, thus rendering them stateless. Adv. Tatour-Irshaid managed to file the registration request a month before the child turned 14, which enabled the child to acquire a residency.

Adv. Tatour-Irshaid further reapplied for family unification and submitted the application along with the child registration applications. She insisted on quickly processing the family unification request given that the family's oldest son went through a road accident and was hospitalized for a prolonged period thus requiring attention by both his parents. After the continued follow up by St. Yves and its lawyer, the Ministry of Interior approved the family unification application and granted the husband a family unification permit.

Adv. Tatour-Irshaid stresses the necessity to register Palestinian children in Jerusalem before they turn 14 years. Failing to register a Jerusalemite child before they turn 14 leads to rejecting the child's registration by Israel's Ministry of Interior which applies a set of discriminatory laws and policies that systematically violate international standards and laws relating to child rights.



TEL AVIV – April 1, 2015 - the Pastoral of Refugees and Migrants in Israel announced recently the death of a small 4 month infant in an overcrowded crib in Tel Aviv, meant for migrants' children, mainly of Eritrean origin. This death unfortunately reveals the very tough living conditions of these little infants and therefore calls for urgent reaction.

On Friday 27 March 2015 a 5<sup>th</sup> child died – within two months – in one of the cribs south of Tel Aviv which fosters migrants' children. Often improvised in apartments or homes slightly equipped with little light and no place to move around, these cribs get quickly overcrowded and the staff under-manned, up to one only adult for ten children aged between 1 month and three years.

Parents are obliged to leave their kids during long hours in order to earn their living and through their little income provide them with shelter, food and clothing. In these conditions, children cannot but suffer. Dozens of infants are involved. Because of lack of adequate attention, and of health care and food, some of them know a sad end to their lives, like this little child who died most probably of strangulation in his bed. Other children would not grow healthily: some of them develop psychic, moving, emotional or social failures.

In order to relieve the families and to relieve a bit these cribs, Pastoral of Migrants and Vicariate St James for Hebrew-speaking Catholics work in conjunction with UNITAF (a branch of UN devoted to humanitarian operations) to find alternatives to these deficient homes. A home for these infants was recently opened at the Center Our Lady Woman of Value. Overwhelmed so quickly, this home cannot absorb all children whose parents are working. That is why the present situation necessitates an urgent action, both on human and financial levels. The plea of these children is simple: "Rush to our help"

*Pierre Loup de Raucourt  
LPJ Correspondent*

## Two Sisters among the Bedouins



JERUSALEM (June 27, 2015) – A comeback on the nursery school in a Bedouin camp in the Judean Desert with the Combonian sisters: a dramatic reality on the ground, often ignored, on the sideline of the society.

The appointment was fixed near Maale Adumim settlement, on the road running downhill from Jerusalem to Jericho. Sr Azezet and Sr Agnes arrived in a jeep, the only way to travel easily through the desert and gave a ride to a small team made of Andrea and Lorenzo, two brothers from the Family of the Visitation, Henrique Abreu, in charge of LPJ projects, and Sr Azezet's niece.

After Maale Adumim and the settlement of Kedar, they went through the Judean desert next to the famous Muntar Hill, not far from the Monastery of Mar Saba, where the natural scenery is gratifying with sand dunes blending with old stones and thorns with wild herbs. At their final destination they discovered a combination of tents, sheds and shacks for sheep: that's where the Bedouins live. It is there that the sisters founded their nursery school.

Local families come from seven Bedouin communities who used to live on hilltops in the east of Jerusalem, a desert area, with only richness consisting of seven water springs. There in the 60s, Maale Adumim was built illegally (beyond the Green Line). It houses now more than 50 000 inhabitants. These seven Bedouin communities, swept out, started roaming about in the adjoining valleys. Today, the communities are spread over some ten camps and live in unstable social and working conditions.

Some time ago, after years of legal battles, the High Court realized the serious consequences of laying hands on seven fountains belonging to these communities. In spite of a decision in their favor, these communities remain marginal to two settlements, which endeavor to drive them out yet farther, and also to Palestinian society, rendering their integration a very difficult task.

Five years ago, the Combonian Sisters decided to explore this reality. They came back to live in the village of Azareyah within a home, in the vicinity of Lazarus Tomb, separated now by the Wall, finished some years ago, that cuts them off from their mother house in Bethany which remains in the area of Jerusalem. They work as a team since then, together with Rabbis for Human Rights and with NGO "Vent de Terre" by going on visits to the most remote Bedouin communities.

An enduring work was launched through many visits in order to broaden the acquaintances, to start new friendships and to explore the needs of these people. The Sisters thus became full members of the larger Bedouin family. They focused on two basic aspects: health and education. A mobile clinic run by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, goes from one village to another to provide care for the sick, including vaccination of children and follow-up of pregnant mothers. Some Bedouin women became auxiliary nurses and three of them were hired by the Palestinian Ministry of Health to work in the Azareyah-based regular clinic.



For education, the sisters relied on help of village women. They secured the training of some of them to become schoolteachers for their children, three for each school. There are now seven schools embracing around 25 children each in the villages of Al Muntar, Tabana, Anata, Abu Hindi, Al Jabal, Abu Nawar I, Abu Nawar II, where about 45 Bedouin women are employed as teachers. Twelve new young girls finished their training on 31 May 2015.

The schools allow to open these women and their children out to a new unknown world: games, training, training courses, personal needs, hygiene, meetings with qualified staff. The common denominator of this positive cycle is the sisters. The teachers stand with one voice to say: "These Christian sisters, our friends, have helped our lives by pulling us upward. In involving us they have changed our daily lives and we are thankful for them."

The visit was terminated by a lunch under the tent of the village chieftain, the one whom Sr Azezet and Sr Agnes call lovingly Abraham, a name easily understood because of his white beard and his sense of hospitality. Along this "periphery of the periphery" of the Holy Land, these people victims of on-going injustice welcome many of these Combonian sisters that nothing would stop them. Nothing would push them back. They have so many plans to bring forward and to promote their help to women, so now they need helpers, contributions, benefactors and of course the Church.

Photos, videos and article: Andres Bergamini, LPJ Correspondent

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## Visas for the Clergy

2014-12-18

Several years ago and in accordance with the Vatican Israel Agreement priests, ministers, pastors and members of religious congregations both men and women of all Christian denominations were granted long term multiple entry visas, at certain occasions, those visas granted also social rights, such as health insurance and other allowances.

At a certain point, the ministry of religious affairs was dismantled, and the issues of the Christian clergy was moved under the authority of the ministry of interior. At about the same time as the Family Reunification Laws and Regulations began to assume more draconian limitations, so also did the visa requirements for, in particular, Arabic speaking clergy of all Christian denominations. But the Christian Community of the Holy Land is already too depleted to be self sustaining in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Therefore recruiting by necessity must take place in Arab speaking neighboring countries since the community that will ultimately be served is an Arabic speaking community.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion gleaned from scores of cases that this visa system is a direct attack on the Arabic speaking Church and the Arabic speaking Christian Community. The Church holds the community together more than any other institution. Taking away native Arabic speakers from an Arabic community is destroying the relationship of trust and love and cultural understanding between the people and their Church. The impact we have been seeing for years in the steady emigration of Christians from the Holy Land.

*Society of St. Yves*

## A Detention Camp in the Negev Desert, Full of Christians



Holot (Agenzia Fides) - In the Negev desert there is a detention center with more than two thousand prisoners, mostly of Christian faith. We are talking about the center of Holot, where Eritreans and Sudanese who arrive in Israel, having escaped from their countries of origin, are locked up. On 15 May, a delegation of 13 members of the Pastoral Care for Migrants of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, led by Patriarchal Vicar Fr. David Neuhaus visited the center to gather evidence and information on the living conditions of detainees. Only two members of the delegation were granted access to detention facilities. But the report of the visit, reported by the official media of the Latin Patriarchate and sent to Fides Agency, still manages to convey a vivid image of the days spent with the inmates.

At the moment, the structure houses 2300 men. But work is in progress to increase the receptivity of the center. The inmates are counted 3 times a day and the freedom of movement granted to them during the day remains entirely theoretical, since the center is located in the desert, far away from population centers, and detainees cannot use public transport to get around. Inmates sleep in a room with ten beds.

The vast majority of them belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, and among them there are three priests. The sweltering heat, the shortcomings in terms of food and health care confirm the impression of being in a prison camp. "Why are we here? What crime have we committed? When will we be released?" Are the most frequently asked questions among inmates gathered by the delegation of the Latin Patriarchate. Most of them fear being sent back to Eritrea or Sudan, which would put the lives of many at risk. To make life in the camp less painful, they ask for better health care and books to be sent to them and teachers to fill the empty days. Currently asylum seekers in Israel are 50 thousand.

(Agenzia Fides 17/05/2014)

## Agreement between Holy See and State of Palestine



PALESTINE/VATICAN (May 18, 2015) - Though the recognition of the State of Palestine by the Holy See is already a fact, the name will appear in an important agreement signed by the two parties. What is more interesting is the content of the future agreement. Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal welcomed the progress, expressing his hope for peace and justice to prevail in the region.

The Bilateral Commission of the Holy See and the State of Palestine concluded its works at the end of a plenary meeting on Wednesday, May 13, 2015. The talks were chaired by Msgr Antoine Camilleri, Undersecretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, and Palestinian Ambassador Rawan Sulaiman, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Multilateral Affairs of the State of Palestine.

"Both Parties agreed that the work of the Commission on the text of the Agreement has been concluded, and that the agreement will be submitted to the respective authorities for approval ahead of setting a date in the near future for the signing."

Since November 2012, following a vote giving Palestine the status of non member Observer State at the United Nations, the Vatican uses the "State of Palestine" in all its official documents, in press releases relating to the country, as for example in the official program of the trip of Pope Francis to the Holy Land in May 2014.

President Mahmoud Abbas twice went to the Vatican since UN vote, and was each time received and officially named "President of the State of Palestine". It was in this context that he was warmly received on Saturday, May 16 by Pope Francis, before attending the May 17 canonization of two Palestinian saints Mariam Baouardy and Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas.

His Beatitude Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, welcomed the "progress to facilitate the life and work of the Church in Palestine". This agreement, according to the Patriarch, "is also a sign of hope and one more consolation for Palestinian people, an additional progress in the way of justice and therefore of peace. Notwithstanding the enormous difficulties, which are ours in the region, we do not stand alone on the international scene. The Holy See and also the whole world are little by little standing by our side. This announcement, which comes on the eve of the canonization of two of our daughters of Palestine, will encourage us to go forward, with determination in our faith for a possible peace for everybody despite the circumstances. Peace will never occur for one people alone." He added: "We hope that, once the agreement is signed, the Arab League will also be present, and that it will serve as an example for other countries".

The Vatican is in favor of a two-state solution for decades, as expressed in the speeches of the Popes, official documents and common agreement on questions relating to the daily life of Christian communities in the Holy Land. It remains to be seen if the agreement with Palestine, declared yesterday, will have an impact on the

lengthy bilateral negotiations between the Holy See and the State of Israel which do not easily move forward. If the Vatican's recognition of the State of Palestine is a new fact, the declaration on May 13 brings nevertheless new components. The diplomatic agreement and its forthcoming signing stands for an important extra step, so that the name "State of Palestine" appears on a key document of vital importance, touching several concrete aspects of the life of the Catholic Church in Palestine. As in all agreements signed by the Holy See with other States, Mgr. Antoine Camilleri stated to *Osservatore Romano*, "the aim is to facilitate the life and action of the Catholic Church, and its recognition on the juridical level, in order to make service to society yet more solid".

Mgr. Camilleri, without disclosing the agreement which has not been made public, presented the highlights. The introduction and the first chapter of the text include the principles and the basic regulations securing a framework for collaboration between the two sides. "The wish for example is being expressed to see a solution to the Palestinian cause and to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the framework of a two-state solution and resolutions of the international community". Then another chapter follows "very elaborate and detailed" on the religious and conscience freedom. There are as well further chapters on different aspects of the life and action of the Church in Palestinian territories; its freedom of action, its staff, its jurisdiction, statutes of Holy Places, protection of its social and charitable activities, the right to promote its means of communication. A chapter is also devoted to financial matters and to properties, points out the Undersecretary for the Holy See's Relations with States. He also brought up the "unique value" of such an agreement, which "handles the presence of the Church in the country where Christianity was born".

*Myriam Ambroselli, Director of the Media Office at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem*



*The Vatican and Palestinian flags over Bethlehem University*

## Jerusalem the City of Peace

Ankara- 21 March 2015  
Fr. Firas Aridah - St. Joseph Parish in Jifna

I want to thank you for the honor of being able to speak with you today about Jerusalem the City of Peace and the Encounter of all Religions. My name is Father Firas Aridah I am a priest of Jerusalem from the Latin Patriarchate: the Heart of the Holy City, the community which: "remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles...was filled with awe at the many miracles...and who owned everything in common...with one heart" (Acts 2:42-46) I'm representing today the Voice of Every Palestinian and Christian in Palestine and Jerusalem. This is the Mother Church of Jerusalem, this is the Holy Land.



Someone said: "If you spend a week in Jerusalem, you can write a book on Jerusalem. If you stay a whole month, then you only can write an article. But if you stay more than a month, You can write nothing. You just listen to Jerusalem."

It is a beautiful place, quite different from the beauty of Ankara still a beautiful place with beautiful people. It is a land sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims; all three faith communities have existed there for centuries. Historically it was home to many nations, and now, in the modern context, it is a home to Israelis and Palestinians. One land, two

peoples, three faiths; each rooted in conviction and vigor for Jerusalem, each who need to be reminded that there can be no exclusive claim which will be accepted.

In the midst of my 'normal duties', as a Priest in a Palestinian village, suffering with those who suffer, I became drawn into this on-going conflict. It was never my intention to get involved in politics – and I am still resolute to leave the politics to the politicians – but my focus is the people. And in my service to the people, I dealt with the occupation. With the occupation came the building of walls of separation in the name of security and Jerusalem became separated from Palestine.

My conscience and my calling drive me to be "a voice for those who have no voice and to defend the weak and the oppressed." (Patr. Sabbah. Seek Peace and Pursue it. 1998) How then can I say nothing as this tragedy befalls the people whom I am serving? How can I remain silent when the Christian community I am serving is disappearing because of this occupation?

The current situation we face is this: Today, we have fewer Christians in the Holy Land than we had in 1947 going from 8% to 1.6% in 2000. When at one point we numbered 27,000 Christians in Jerusalem, now we are only 9,000 Christians. Our people are emigrating, our presence is threatened and if the trend continues, our future is moving towards extinction. This is impacted by the fact that there are over 550,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In the words of our Patriarch Fouad Twal: "ultimately, Israelis and Palestinians ... must work out their differences in a just and righteous manner, in ways that require painful compromises."

We the Christian community of the Holy Land, the people of Calvary, will not allow for our hope to die nor will we allow others to use our voice. We will not stand for a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible which seeks to legitimize the infringement of Palestinian rights. We have a unified Christian message which we are able and willing to give to the world. This message can be found in the Kairos Palestine document. We are thinkers, we are theologians, we are philosophers, we are teachers, we are believers in the Bible and in Jesus Christ who "interpreted to the disciples of Emmaus the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Lk. 24:27) and we are rolling up our sleeves and are making a difference by shedding light in a bleak situation.

Jerusalem is the symbol of this dialogue between God and man as well as between man and man. Therefore, Jerusalem is the city of God and the city of man.

We believe that if Christian, Muslim and Jewish children play together, they will become friends – then and only then will we have a prospect for lasting peace. Sadly, in the midst of this conflict, few are looking to serve humanity; few are seeing the human faces of children, mothers, fathers and the elderly which are violated by oppression and violence. We see these faces and we realize that we cannot do it alone.

Israel is not able to make any step toward Peace without external pressure in order to enter seriously the path of peace, and in order to help both sides towards reconciliation. The reasons are:

\*There is a lack of trust in the existing political alliances.

\*The forces of extremism, whether genuine or exploited by Western political forces, are growing and gaining followers and supporters. A radical change must take place in the Western policy regarding the Middle-East. Religions and religious leaders for peace can and must have a role in reaching this radical change.

Prolonging the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis will serve only the extremists on both sides and will weaken the supporters of peace on both sides.

The Christians in Palestine are small in number, but we are doing our part to work for a better future for both Palestinians and Israelis. Despite the despair and the violence in society, they still believe in the ability to change the world and so they become leaders for justice, peace and tolerance instead of pupils of death and destruction. The Christians of Jerusalem (and of the Holy Land) like their Muslims Brothers have the right to enjoy full religious freedom. This consists in the ownership, custody and control of, free access to, and worship in their Holy Places. These rights of ownership, custody, access to and worship, which the different churches have acquired throughout history should continue as is. These rights, known as the Statu Quo, must continue to be recognized and respected.

The occupation must end because it is a sin against the dignity of man and hence against God Himself. Violence and terrorism must stop. There must be no more settlements built on Palestinian land. Our Christian presence must be supported and nurtured. You have to support the efforts of institutions who are working to serve humanity.

In the name of President Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, and In the name of His Beatitude our Patriarch Fouad Twal and in the name of every human person, of all those who suffer in the land of God, Israelis or Palestinians, I invite you to come to the Holy Land to Jerusalem, to be present in our lives and to pray for us and with us, to put the necessary pressures on the "strong", to help all of us to reconciliation, so that we can arrive together one day to the goal in which we are all interested – Peace.

As long as the international community remains unable to install justice and peace in our more than sixty years old conflict in the Holy Land, what is the use of so many meetings and speeches? Jerusalem is the symbol of the presence of God in our life. It is the symbol of brotherhood that unites the sons and daughters of the three monotheistic religions. Jerusalem is a grace for humankind. Peace for Jerusalem is a condition sine qua non for a durable peace in the region. We are the Christians we have to remain faithful to our faith, and Faithful to the homeland: and Faithful to Jerusalem: as our Spiritual and Political Capital.

Jerusalem is at present a sign of contradiction and conflict. Nonetheless, she continue to be a sign of hope, since she is the means by which the divine message have been transmitted to a believing mankind, believers of all peoples must meet together to hear the voice of God here. If they listen to his voice they will be able to restore to Jerusalem her sacred character and her power to bring peace, to humanise. Nobody should monopolize Jerusalem, because monopolizing Jerusalem is violating its universal character and identity. Nobody should prevent Jerusalem in its holiness and uniqueness becoming both the national symbol for two peoples and spiritual capital of the three religions. When we come to understand and accept this reality, we will not have to resolve the problem of Jerusalem, Jerusalem itself will resolve our differences. May God bless you all, and bless every step you take to support the dignity of human life in this world.

*The Holy Land Review, the Franciscan Journal of Faith, Culture and Archaeology, Summer 2013*  
Text - Anna Clementi / Photo - Andrea and Magda



### **How I Demolish Your Home** **Water Tank**

Until three years ago it was normal to demolish clearly identifiable buildings. Today, the new trend is to demolish water tanks.”

Speaking is Assan Shaban, lawyer and Palestinian who works for the Society of St. Yves, the human rights legal center of the Latin Patriarchate. His office is in the Old City of Jerusalem but a large part of his work is in the Palestinian Territories, in West Bank villages and rural areas where his assistants live. “Since June 2009 in the

West Bank, 50 water tanks have been destroyed. I think they find it more efficient. In fact, if you destroy a house but leave the water tank, people can pitch a tent and continue to farm the land. But if they destroy a water tank which serves you for irrigation and to live, then you are forced to leave. We are dealing with a serious action, prohibited by the Geneva Convention. The Israelis, however, reinventing the current regulations, maintain they have the right to do it.”

The process for water tank demolition is the same as that of any other structure considered abusive, such as a tent or a chemical bath, according to lawyers for the Society of St. Yves. It takes place according to a strict procedure followed by Israeli authorities. The first thing is to issue a stop working order, a notice which orders the owner to stop “construction” and invites the owner to a hearing where he must bring proof of having obtained a standard building permit. “Usually, in the case of water tanks you are given three days' time at the end of which, if you don't exhibit a building permit, demolition takes place,” explained Shaban. “An Israeli committee exists to evaluate these applications but, as proven by facts, in 99.9 percent of the cases, the applications are rejected and a final order of destruction is issued.” In the case of water tanks, delivery of the stop working order is uncertain at times as this often involves farmers living in the countryside. If the owner is in the fields, the notice can be attached to the structure to be demolished, with the risk that it becomes lost. “The demolition of water tanks has increased. The situation is worsening from many viewpoints.” The pessimism is expressed by Alex Abu Ata, in charge of advocacy for eWash, a coalition of about 30 international organizations working in the water and sanitation field. It was formed in 2002 with the goal of making known the water problems in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Italian organizations CISP, a non-governmental development and humanitarian agency; GVC, a non-government volunteer organization involved in community development work in the Third World; and COOPI, a non-governmental organization fighting poverty in the Third World, are members.

As we were speaking in the headquarters at Beit Hanina, Alex receives a text message. “This message is advising me that right now there is a demolition taking place. As soon as I receive it, I publish it on our Website and relaunch it to activists through Facebook and Twitter.” Ewash operates in the Palestinian Territories and in Europe. “In the West Bank and Gaza we work with schools and universities, informing students. Many don't know the dimensions of the problem and think that lack of water is the result of a scarcity of resources. In

Europe, instead, we raise the issue at the headquarters of institutions and in contacts with the media. Awhile back, for example, I accompanied some journalists from the BBC and Reuters in an area undergoing demolitions. Many structures receiving demolition orders had been financed by British development agencies. Basically, this meant that the Israeli government was destroying buildings financed with money from English contributors. We hope that because of this, public opinion will persuade the English government to pressure the Israeli government to halt the demolitions.”

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## Latin Patriarchate condemns sale of a Church-owned land to benefit a settlement



*Jun 11, 2015 - Latin Patriarchate*

**PRESS RELEASE** –The local press recently disclosed how a sizable property belonging to the Presbyterian Church located in Palestine between Bethlehem and Hebron, was sold to buyers who intend to turn it into a new Jewish settlement. The Latin Patriarchate condemns such an act, and underscores the critical implications for Christian heritage and life of the local Christian community.

The site, located near the Aroub Palestinian refugee camp on the main road (Highway 60), between Bethlehem and Hebron, was allegedly bought three years ago by a right wing activist Aryeh King, according to the local press. Reconstruction work in the compound has been ongoing for the past two months with plans to bring in new residents of about twenty settler families. The site is a 38-dunam (9.5-acre) complex with eight buildings. The location of the complex is of strategic importance for the settlers who seek to expand more and more in the area between Etzion and Hebron where the Karmel Tzur settlement is located in the midst of several Palestinian villages.

According to media reports, a Swedish company created in 2007 would have been used to cover the sale of the Church and its compound. The purchase of the property would have been then registered with the Israeli civil administration by this same Swedish group in 2012, just before the company announced its dissolution. The Swedish company and the property passed to new ownership – the nonprofit organization American Friends of the Everest Foundation which operates in East Jerusalem and aggressively buying houses and other Palestinian properties in the area at high prices, funded by American millionaire Irving Moskowitz.

An incomprehensible and most complicated entanglement with serious consequences for the Palestinian Christian community. The Latin Patriarchate is very disturbed by these revelations and strongly denounces these acts.

***Editors note: The following articles are about the Christian situation in Gaza. They are dated to follow the progression of their situation from last summer to this one.***

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## ***Vatican Representative to UN Addresses Situation in Palestine***



***(Vatican Radio) Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva 21st Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem. Geneva, 23 July 2014.***

Mr. President,

As the number of people killed, wounded, uprooted from their homes, continues to increase in the conflict between Israel and some Palestinian groups, particularly in the Gaza Strip, the voice of reason seems submerged by the blast of arms. Violence will lead nowhere either now or in the future. The perpetration of injustices and the violation of human rights, especially the right to life and to live in peace and security, sow fresh seeds of hatred and resentment. A culture of violence is being consolidated, the fruits of which are destruction and death. In the long run, there can be no winners in the current tragedy, only more suffering.

Most of the victims are civilians, who by international humanitarian law, should be protected. The United Nations estimates that approximately seventy percent of Palestinians killed have been innocent civilians. This is just as intolerable as the rockets missiles directed indiscriminately toward civilian targets in Israel. Consciences are paralyzed by a climate of protracted violence, which seeks to impose solution through the annihilation of the other. Demonizing others, however, does not eliminate their rights. Instead, the way to the future, lies in recognizing our common humanity.

In his Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Pope Francis demanded that the present unacceptable situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict be brought to an end.[1] “For the good of all,” he said, “there is a need to intensify efforts and initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for a stable peace based on justice, on the recognition of the rights of every individual, and on mutual security. The time has come for everyone to find the courage to be generous and creative in the service of the common good, the courage to forge a peace which rests on the acknowledgment by all of the right of two States to exist and to live in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.”[2] The legitimate aspiration to security, on one side, and to decent living conditions, on the other, with access to the normal means of existence like medicines, water and jobs, for example, reflects a fundamental human right, without which peace is very difficult to preserve.

The worsening situation in Gaza is an incessant reminder of the necessity to arrive at a cease-fire immediately and to start negotiating a lasting peace. “Peace will bring countless benefits for the peoples of this region and for the world as a whole,” adds Pope Francis, “and so it must resolutely be pursued, even if each side has to make certain sacrifices.” It becomes a responsibility of the international community to engage in earnest in the pursuit of peace and to help the parties in this horrible conflict reach some understanding in order to stop the violence and look to the future with mutual trust.

Mr. President,

The Delegation of the Holy See reiterates its view that violence never pays. Violence will only lead to more suffering, devastation and death, and will prevent peace from becoming a reality. The strategy of violence can be contagious and become uncontrollable. To combat violence and its detrimental consequences we must avoid becoming accustomed to killing. At a time where brutality is common and human rights violations are ubiquitous, we must not become indifferent but respond positively in order to attenuate the conflict which concerns us all.

The media should report in a fair and unbiased manner the tragedy of all who are suffering because of the conflict, in order to facilitate the development of an impartial dialogue that acknowledges the rights of everyone, respects the just concerns of the international community, and benefits from the solidarity of the international community in supporting a serious effort to attain peace. With an eye to the future, the vicious circle of retribution and retaliation must cease. With violence, men and women will continue to live as enemies and adversaries, but with peace they can live as brothers and sisters.

Thank you, Mr. President.



*Some of the Faithful in Gaza*



## Dear Friends and Supporters of Bethlehem University

7/24/14

The war in Gaza rages on, and Bethlehem University can only offer prayers for the people of Gaza and its 435 graduates, many of whom have been hiding in their homes, schools, mosques and in churches since the start of this offensive. Many more have no place to hide, but on the streets where as reported the stench of death kills.

We are very concerned about our graduates in Gaza as many have not responded to our contacts through social media and phone. We are very lucky to have received as Bethlehem University many messages inquiring about our safety here in Bethlehem. For all of you, we say THANK YOU, but do remember us and our graduates in Gaza in your prayers. Team members of the Advancement Office at Bethlehem University have been able to connect with several of our graduates.

Rana Al-Sayegh, BU'99, with her 4 children were hiding in the corridor of her flat when we rang her yesterday morning. "I am not sure how to keep my children safe, several buildings around me where all brought to the ground... I am so worried, but happy that you called me," Rana said and has asked we pray for them.

Our Vice Chancellor, Brother Peter Bray, was able to speak over the phone to the mother of Berlanty Azzam, a BU Graduate of 2010, who is currently working in the US. Berlanty was not allowed to continue her studies at Bethlehem University by the Israeli Authority simply because she came from Gaza, but Bethlehem University enabled her to graduate through distance learning while in Gaza.

Berlanty's mother asked Brother Peter to pray for her and her family. "Our lives are unbearable, we are very scared, and several houses in our neighborhood have completely vanished". Mohammed Abu Hawila, BU '89, who is an UNRWA School Deputy Principal in Gaza City, told us that while his immediate family is safe, several of his friends have perished, and many more have been seriously injured. He told us: "a lot of people moved to live in the school classes where I work. As many as 60 people are living in a small room in a very difficult situation, may God help them."

To all our graduates in the Gaza Strip, we are praying for you and hope this will come to an end very soon. To all our friends and supporters, we ask you to pray for the people of Gaza at these hard times, and we also ask you to pray for us so that Bethlehem University may continue to be a "Beacon of Hope and an Oasis of Peace" in this Holy, but troubled Land.

**Brother Stephen Tuohy, Vice President for Advancement**

Friday, 19 September 2014



The war between Israel and Hamas has exasperated an already dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. After the 51-day war ended, Gaza's fragile infrastructure including health, education, water and sanitation facilities and electrical infrastructure has sustained severe damages. Israel still bans construction materials from entering the Gaza Strip stalling major efforts to reconstruct local businesses, factories, public institutions, schools and homes. Gaza's unemployment and poverty rates have been driven

to higher levels due to the level of destruction. Thousands of families whose homes were damaged or destroyed remain homeless and continue to struggle to find adequate shelter.

**The Coordinating Committee of the Catholic Aid Organizations (CCAO) in the Holy Land** has held weekly meetings since the war began in early July to better coordinate emergency aid for the people of Gaza. The Catholic charities: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Caritas Jerusalem, Pontifical Mission for Palestine (PMP), the German Association of the Holy Land, and the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, Bethlehem University, the Solidarity of Catholic Schools and the Latin Patriarchate have exchanged information on emerging humanitarian needs and aid projects in order to avoid duplication and complement each other's work.

A total of \$5 million in emergency relief was pledged by donors worldwide to support CCAO members' emergency aid programs in Gaza. Various emergency relief projects have been implemented during and after the war:

**Caritas Jerusalem** has distributed emergency supplies during and after the war. Caritas delivered 1,300 hygiene kits and some 800 liters of fuel to UN schools as well as to families sheltered in the Greek Orthodox School and Latin Patriarchate Schools; families were provided with hot meals and children underwent checkups, received medicine; psychosocial activities were also provided; food, milk and diapers were distributed to schools, basic supplies for 28 handicapped people sheltered the Sisters of Mother Theresa and 100 food parcels to sheltered families at the Holy Family Church. Additionally, fuel and medical supplies were delivered to Caritas Medical Center and four hospitals as well as medical supplies to the Ministry of Health. Caritas will continue its emergency aid include food distribution, cash distribution, healthcare services (Caritas Medical Center and mobile clinic), school supplies, backpacks and uniforms for schoolchildren, hygiene kits and Christmas gifts for 3,000 students will be distributed until the end of the year.

**Catholic Relief Services** responded to the crisis by distributing 6,000 NFI kits and 8,000 hygiene kits to displaced families; distributed in-kind medical supplies and fuel to Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, Caritas Jerusalem clinics and its network and Near East Council of Churches Mother and Child Clinics. School supplies and backpacks for 10,000 children; distributed unconditional vouchers for 400 families that meet critical food, water and other needs. Additionally, CRS has implemented a cash-for-work program rehabilitating 30

kindergarten classrooms, facilities and the construction of playgrounds and gardens in addition to psychosocial support in all of its programs. CRS is in the process of planning activities for the restoration of agricultural livelihoods, through vouchers and cash-for-work labor for local farmers.

**Pontifical Mission for Palestine** also delivered hundreds of liters of fuel to support the operations of the three Near East Council of Churches Mother and Child Clinics and Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, distributed medical supplies, medical equipment and medicines at these health centers and covered medical check-ups for children, healthcare services and surgery for poor and displaced patients. With funding from PMP that provided medical supplies, equipment and covered healthcare, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital has treated 5,000 patients since the war began including 1,600 burn cases, free of charge while the Near East Council of Churches' three mother and child care clinics has treated twice as many patients normally treated per day. PMP's program also supported Christian families in need of food and other household items through the Myrrhbearers Society and the Latin Parish in Gaza. Pontifical Mission have also mobilized institution and home renovation programs to repair sections of the Rosary Sisters School, NECC's network of clinics and vocational training centers, as well as the residence of the Sisters of Incarnate Word among several institutions that have sustained war damages. In collaboration with the Greek Orthodox Trustees Committee and the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), PMP is currently undertaking an assessment of 88 Christian homes. PMP's home rehabilitation program will rehabilitate Christian homes sustaining minor damages from the war. PMP will soon implement its psychosocial programs at five Christian schools and 22 public schools and kindergartens, Al-Ahli Arab hospital, NECC clinics and the YMCA – Gaza for the remainder of the school year.



CCAO members have directly aided or are in the process of aiding the Latin Patriarchate Parish in Gaza through the Latin Patriarchate, which includes the two schools (Latin Patriarchate School and Holy Family School), the parish and the Sisters of Mother Theresa's home for the handicapped. Other CCAO members including Caritas Baby Hospital, the German Association of the Holy Land and the Custody of the Holy Land have generously provided financial aid that has supported emergency aid programs at the Latin Patriarchate Parish, kindergartens, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and other Christian institutions in Gaza. Bethlehem University and Secretariat of Solidarity have also generously contributed towards the emergency program in Gaza.

**Pontifical Mission Jerusalem**

## Bishops Call for Human Dignity as Basis of Peace



*Editors' notes: Since 1998, the Co-ordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church of the Holy Land has met at the invitation of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. Expressly mandated by the Holy See, the Holy Land Co-ordination meets every January in the Holy Land, focusing on prayer, pilgrimage and persuasion with the aim of acting in solidarity with the Christian community as it experiences intense political and social-economic pressure.*

### Statement of the Co-ordination of Bishops' Conferences in support of the Church in the Holy Land

15 January 2015

We came to pray with and support the Christian community and to promote peace and human dignity in this divided land.

We witnessed the tragic consequences of the failure of both local and international politicians to advance peace. Human dignity is given by God and is absolute. The ongoing conflict assaults the dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis, but in a particular way our commitment to the poor calls us to lift up the suffering people in Gaza. A year ago, we called Gaza "a man-made disaster, a shocking scandal, an injustice that cries out to the human community for a resolution." In the wake of the terrible destruction caused by last year's war, our presence reminded the small Christian community that they are not forgotten.



Many tens of thousands of families in Gaza lack adequate shelter. In the latest freezing weather, at least two infants died of exposure. The continuing blockade dramatically impedes rebuilding and contributes to desperation that undermines Israelis' legitimate hope for security. It also creates intolerable levels of unemployment and pushes ordinary people into deeper poverty.

Despite the devastation, the appalling scenes of destruction we saw, and the fears of another war we heard, hope is alive in Gaza. We saw families resolutely rebuilding their lives. We witnessed a small Christian community that has enormous faith. We admired the tenacity of many volunteers. We visited Holy Family School where Muslims and Christians study and play together in harmony. We met with the Holy Rosary Sisters, who true to their co-foundress Marie-Alphonsine, to be canonized a saint this year by Pope Francis, exercise a prophetic ministry of education. We celebrated Mass with the Sisters of the Bethlehem Carmel. Their foundress Mariam Baouardy, another Palestinian whose life testifies to the holiness that still emanates from this Land, also will be canonized.

Political leaders must defend the human dignity of the people in Gaza. One student poignantly told us that he received an email during the war asking if he needed food or clothing or shelter. Without bitterness, he

replied that what he needed was dignity. People of good will on both sides of the conflict want the same thing, a dignified life worthy of the human person.

In the coming months we will continue to oppose the building of the proposed wall in the Cremisan Valley. It would result in the loss of the lands and livelihoods of many Christian families. This situation is tragically a microcosm of the reality of the land issue. We will also continue to oppose expansion of the settlement program, illegal under international law, which we witnessed acutely in Hebron. Its impact on the freedom of movement of Palestinians and the confiscation of lands is simply unjust.

After the failed negotiations and ensuing violence of 2014, we urge public officials to be creative, to take new approaches, to build bridges, not walls. We must humanize the conflict by fostering more interaction between Israelis and Palestinians. Peace will only come when all parties respect the fact that the Holy Land is sacred to three faiths and home to two peoples.

Aware that this year we walk in the footsteps of Pope Francis, we take to heart his recent statement to the Diplomatic Corps:

“My thoughts turn above all to the Middle East, beginning with the beloved land of Jesus which I had the joy of visiting last May, and for whose peace we constantly pray. We did this with extraordinary intensity, together with the then President of Israel, Shimon Peres, and the President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, inspired by a confident hope that negotiations between the two parties will once more resume, for the sake of ending violence and reaching a solution which can enable Palestinians and Israelis alike to live at last in peace within clearly established and internationally recognized borders, thus implementing the ‘two state solution’.”

The path to peace demands respect for the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians. Our prayer nurtures the hope that makes peace possible. We call on all Christians to pray for the Jews, Christians and Muslims of this Land we call Holy.



**Bishop Stephen Ackermann, Germany**  
**Archbishop Stephen Brislin, South Africa**  
**Bishop Raymond Browne, Ireland**  
**Bishop Peter Bürcher, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden**  
**Bishop Oscar Cantú, United States of America**  
**Bishop Christopher Chessun, Church of England**  
**Bishop Michel Dubost, France**  
**Archbishop Ricardo Fontana, Italy**  
**Bishop Lionel Gendron, Canada**  
**Bishop Felix Gmur, Switzerland**  
**Archbishop Patrick Kelly, England and Wales**  
**Bishop William Kenney, England and Wales,**  
**Bishop Declan Lang, England and Wales**  
**Bishop Kieran O'Reilly, Ireland**  
**Bishop Thomas Maria Renz, Germany**  
**Archbishop Joan Enric Vives, Spain**

## 'Compared with a year ago, we're worse off,' says Gaza parish priest

by Paul Jeffrey



*Fr Jorge Hernandez celebrates Mass at Holy Family Catholic church in Gaza (Photo: CNS)*

**(Catholic News Service)** Gaza City, July 19, 2015 – A year after a war that turned daily life into a nightmare, a Catholic priest in Gaza has said the situation in the besieged Palestinian territory has deteriorated even further.

“Compared with a year ago, we’re worse off. Although a truce stopped the war, the blockade of Gaza by Israel has grown more intense. This has direct consequences for the population,” said Fr Jorge Hernandez, parish priest of Holy Family Catholic parish in Gaza City. The priest said the war also served as a recruiting tool for Hamas, the Islamic party that has controlled Gaza since 2007.

“The war generated new activism throughout Gaza. The number of people willing to fight has multiplied, whether on behalf of Hamas or Islamic Jihad or the Salafists, and now even with the Islamic State. Despite that, the great majority of the people of Gaza is not aligned with one party or another. They just want to live a normal life,” Fr Hernandez, an Argentine missionary of the Institute of the Incarnate Word, told the US Catholic News Service.

The 50-day war cost the lives of more than 2,250 Palestinians, 65 per cent of whom were civilians, according to a June report from a UN investigation. The report said “the scale of the devastation was unprecedented”. It said the Israeli military launched more than 6,000 air strikes, 14,500 tank shells and 45,000 artillery shells into Gaza between July 7 and August 26, 2014.

The war also “caused immense distress and disruption to the lives of Israeli civilians”, the UN said, reporting that nearly 4,900 rockets and more than 1,700 mortars were fired by Palestinian armed groups during that period. Sixty-six Israeli soldiers were killed, along with six civilians.

The report also cited as possible war crimes the conduct of Israeli operations in residential neighbourhoods, as well as the killing of 21 suspected collaborators by Hamas's armed wing.

Fr Hernandez said militants came to his church compound twice looking for alleged spies among some 1,400 civilians who took shelter there. Church buildings were damaged when Israel bombed a neighbouring house. At one point, Fr Hernandez and several members of the Missionaries of Charity shepherded a group of 29 disabled children and nine elderly women into the open.

"We put them in the patio in front of church, a place that's far from any homes. And then we prayed that Israel wouldn't bomb the church," he said.

Gaza's children continue to be affected by the war, the priest said. Besides thousands who remain in temporary shelters, he said the overwhelming violence of the conflict has created discipline problems, with normal tensions in the family and on the street more quickly escalating into physical violence. Lingering stress generates health problems.

"Some kids continue to have problems with speech or bed-wetting, and now that there are rumours of another war – some are even talking about specific dates – one child's hair has started to fall out again," he said. One Catholic leader in the region said that Gaza's Christians have nonetheless adjusted to their perilous situation.

"When I came here immediately after the war, everyone I talked to pleaded for a one-way ticket out of Gaza. But I no longer hear that. They are resilient, this is their home, and they're resolved that they're going to make a contribution to society. They are proud to be both Christian and Palestinian, no matter the difficult conditions," said Sami El-Yousef, regional director for Palestine and Israel of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

Of Gaza's 1.8 million population, only about 2,300 are Christian. Latin Catholics number fewer than 200. Relations between this small minority and the Muslim majority have been marred by discrimination. "When one looks for work here, the first thing they ask is if you are a Muslim. If you are, then they ask if you support Hamas or Fatah. If neither, they ask which mosque you go to, because they want to know who you're loyal to," Fr Hernandez said.

"But if you're a Christian, you won't get asked those questions because you won't get the job. The only way Christians can get jobs is through a Muslim friend who serves as an intermediary. No store or school or bank will give them a job, so they come to the church asking for help."

There are occasional episodes of harassment of Christians on the street, Fr Hernandez said, which is one reason he maintains good relations with Hamas officials.



"It's important for me to have good contacts, because if there's a problem I just call someone at a high level and immediately they respond and grab the responsible person. If I had to go to the police to file a report, and the police officer had a long beard, then nothing would happen," he said.

Vatican support for Palestinians, which has strengthened under Pope Francis, has helped ease tensions on the ground, Fr Hernandez said.

"We are treated by Israel as Palestinians, but at times other Palestinians don't want to recognise us

as Palestinians. What the pope has done has helped us a lot within our community. We are just as Palestinian as Hamas. And if they forget that, we remind them of what the pope has said and done,” he said.

Fr Hernandez had an opportunity to personally thank Pope Francis for the Vatican’s support when the priest was invited to the Vatican the day after the war ended last year. “Bishop William Shomali [the auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem] called me on the phone and said I had to leave Gaza immediately,” Fr Hernandez recalled. “But we had just finished living through a war. I couldn’t understand what was more urgent than remaining here with the people. But he didn’t want to tell me the reason over the phone.

“I pushed him, and finally he told me in Latin: ‘The man in white wants to see you.’ At first I thought I was losing my Latin. I asked him if I was understanding correctly, and he said yes. I called my superior, and he went to talk with the Latin Patriarch. He called me back in 30 minutes and told me it was true. So I packed my things and left.”

Two days later, Fr Hernandez was embraced by his fellow Argentine inside the Vatican. “He was a true pastor, hurting for all that had happened to the people here. He was sad about the violence on both sides. When we spoke of the children, he got emotional. We spoke at length about how the chemicals used in the war had affected the health of the people. He knew a lot about what had gone on in Gaza,” Fr Hernandez said.

“I told him how much we appreciated a message he sent us in the middle of the war. I told him we had translated it for all the people, and that it was a big source of hope and courage for us.” The priest said that at one point during the hour long meeting he confessed to Francis that he was nervous. “He told me not to worry, to feel at home. I looked around and thought, ‘The Vatican is now my house. Caramba.’”

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## Gaza – two young Christians hold their engagement



*GAZA – a festive atmosphere was lived at the parish of Gaza on Sunday, 16 March 2015. Two young people got engaged during a traditional ritual. Report by LPJ special envoy - Andres Bergamini*

Dalia is only 18 years and has not finished her studies yet. Johnny is a bit over 20. On Sunday afternoon, they sealed their friendship by getting engaged at the Catholic Church of Gaza, a parish dedicated to the Holy Family. As the present world always raises the image of the family, the smallest – and the suffering one – parish of the diocese of the Latin Patriarchate, gave solemn blessing to two young peoples of the parish group, calling on them to deepen their love, so that it may grow up.

Through touching and meaningful words Fr Jorgen Hernandez, Priest of the Latin Parish of Gaza, talked to the faithful, who came in large number to the celebration, and reminded them of the basic principles of the marital life. This love which originates from God, who creates and unites, when we love the same way Jesus loves us, supporting one another, giving ourselves and opening out to life.

As from now and during one year, Johnny & Dalia will be able to start to live and to deepen their relation waiting for the fulfillment of their marriage vows. Christians living in the Gaza Strip are more than a thousand. The effect of the devastating war of summer 2014, hard economic conditions, difficulty in finding work, closing crossing points between Israel and Egypt makes life of Gazans extremely strenuous.

In spite of everything, our Christians and in particular the young people give a heroic testimony of hope. Smiles on their faces are striking, their hospitality and their opening are unusual. May the Lord bless Johnny and Dalia and grant them to them and to all their friends in Gaza, days of peace and joy.



