

Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land

“Watchman, what time of night?” (Isaiah 21,11)

Preamble

1. Christians in the Holy Land, in Israel, Palestine and Jordan, we share the hopes and aspirations of our peoples amidst violence and despair. Here, we are called in various ways to reflect in faith on the concrete issues which we face. Together, we have the responsibility to witness, by word and deed, to the Good News, and to help one another navigate our daily way as disciples of Christ. Thus, we might become a more visible sign of unity, hope, peace and charity in this Land, torn by war and hatred.

2. I present to you today, brothers and sisters, this document, fruit of a common reflection, written together with members of our diocesan Theological Commission, diocesan priests and religious. The document deals with issues that concern our Local Church as well as the Universal Church, in the light of the importance of the Church of Jerusalem and the events that are taking place in these times. Naturally, our reflection derives from the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the issues that we live out in our daily lives. It is in the light of this teaching and of our specific context in the Holy Land that we address this document to you in order to help you to see more clearly in the midst of the difficulties of daily life. Among the multiple aspects of our lives, we concentrate here on three major points: violence and terrorism, our relations with the Jewish people in the Holy Land and our relations with the Muslims in the Holy Land.

3. These questions might also be of interest to our brothers and sisters in the different Churches around the world. We want to reflect together with you all, and pray together as we live these difficult and complex situations each day. We seek to find in this reflection and communion of prayer the courage to remain faithful to our vocation in this Land that is the Lord's. In our life as members of our different societies and within our Churches, there exists the constant danger of oversimplifying and generalizing. Sincere prayer and our presence together before God will help us to become more conscious of differing perspectives as well as of the truth that must be discovered afresh day to day in the complexity of our circumstances.

Violence and terrorism

A condemnation of terrorism

4. We have always condemned and we continue to condemn all acts of violence against individuals and society¹. We have condemned and we continue to condemn especially terrorism, acts of extreme violence, often organized, which are intended to injure and kill the innocent in order that such terrorism yield reluctant support for one's cause. In a previous document we clearly stated: "Terrorism is illogical, irrational and unacceptable as a means of resolving conflict"². Indeed, terrorism is both immoral and a sin.

A context of despair

5. We are painfully conscious, though, of the injustices, their inhuman hurts and the climate which condition these acts of violence, most notably the occupation. We have stated: "In the case of terrorism there are two guilty parties: first, those who carry out such action, those who plan and support them, and secondly, those who create situations of injustice which provoke terrorism"³. This climate of violence knows no borders; it does not distinguish between Israeli and Palestinian. Among both peoples, helplessness, frustration and despair unleash emotions of anger and revenge in a never-ending cycle of violence. Legitimate self-defense is corroded by disproportionate and evil means, especially collective punishment or the support of the occupation, under the guise of trying to insure security or freedom.

¹ See SABBAH, MICHEL (LATIN PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM), *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998) nn. 14-19. See also the speech delivered by the Patriarch on September 11, 2002 at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem on the anniversary of the attacks in the United States, *Jerusalem*, 4-5/8 (2002), 151-152.

² SABBAH, MICHEL (LATIN PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM), *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998), n. 15.

³ Op. cit. n. 15.

Realistic hopes for true peace through justice, pardon and love are labeled illusions of facile optimism. They are replaced by the paralysis of cynical fatalism. Walls are then erected both in the country and in the hearts of its inhabitants. Hope is reduced to mere daily survival. The Holy Land, some claim, has become unholy.

Our reason for hope

6. In this very Land God has gifted humanity with the Son of God, the Christ. His shedding of his own blood by the violent act of crucifixion has reconciled us to God and has broken down the walls of hostility between us. His resurrection has defeated hatred, violence and death. "He is the peace between us and has made the two peoples into one" (cf. Eph 2:13-16, Rom 5:10-11).

A pedagogy of non-violence

7. God is always calling the disciples of Jesus Christ to be a community of reconciliation⁴. In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we are called to be the prophetic bearers of the good news of peace to those far away and those close at hand (cf. 2Cor 13:13, Eph 2:17, Is 57:19). We accomplish this not through acts of violence but through concrete gestures of peacemaking, which oppose a culture of death and contribute to a culture of life. This God-given and difficult vocation of the Church and of her members requires a specific pedagogy or learning process of an active, creative Gospel of non-violence in our attitudes, in our words and in our actions. Peace making is not a tactic but a way of life.

Jews, Judaism and State of Israel

Church teaching

8. In communion with the entire Church, the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Jews and Judaism is also our teaching. With the entire Church, we meditate on the roots of our faith in the Old Testament, which we share with the Jewish people, and in the New Testament that is written largely by Jews about Jesus of Nazareth⁵. With the entire Church, we regret the attitudes of contempt, the conflicts and the hostility that have marked the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

Our context

9. We seek to apply and live the teaching of the worldwide Catholic Church within our own particular context⁶. Unlike our Christian brothers and sisters in Europe, in the Holy Land, our history as Christians has been the history of a minority community (a status that we shared with the Jews in the Middle East) in the midst of a civilization that is predominantly Muslim. For many centuries, we have not been a dominant majority in relation to the Jewish people as was the case in the West.

10. Our contemporary context is unique: we are the only Local Church that encounters the Jewish people in a State that is defined as Jewish and where the Jews are the dominant and empowered majority, a reality that dates from 1948. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between the State of Israel and the Arab world, and in particular between Israelis and Palestinians, means that the national identity of the majority of our faithful is locked in conflict with the national identity of the majority of the Jews.

11. We are called to unity, reconciliation and love from within our local Church. In our very midst and as full members of our Church there are Hebrew speaking Catholics who are Jewish or who have chosen to live in the midst of the Jewish people⁷. The Holy Father has just named an auxiliary bishop for this community. Adding to the richness of the Church in Jerusalem are also many Catholics from other lands, who have made their home in Jerusalem. Seeking to be in communion together, Arabs, Jews and those from other nations, the Church of Jerusalem learns to be a visible sign of the oneness of all humanity. In our constant search for dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters, we cannot make abstraction of this context.

The reality

12. As Church, we witness the continued Israeli military occupation of Palestinian lands and the bloody violence between the two peoples. Together with all men and women of peace and goodwill, including

⁴ See op. cit. Section 6 "Reconciliation, forgiveness and loving your enemy," nn. 28-37.

⁵ See SABBAAH, MICHEL (LATIN PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM), *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* (November 1993).

⁶ See ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES IN THE HOLY LAND, "Our Relation with the Jews" in "Relations with Believers of Other Religions", *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 153-157.

⁷ "Our Relation with the Jews," 156.

many Israeli and Palestinian Muslims, Christians and Jews, we are called to be both a voice of truth and a healing presence. The worldwide Catholic Church teaches that dialogue with the Jewish people is distinct from the political options adopted by the State of Israel. Furthermore, "the existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious but in their reference to the common principles of international law"⁸. The Church is called to be a prophetic witness in our particular context, a witness that dares imagine a different future: freedom, justice, security, peace and prosperity for all inhabitants of the Holy Land that is first and foremost the Lord's⁹.

Perspectives

13. Facing this heavy responsibility and difficult task the Church of Jerusalem is struggling, learning, striving and she counts on all her faithful, Arabs, Jews and those from other nations, to help her discern the will of God and the faithful discipleship of Christ. We are already engaged in searching out our Jewish brothers and sisters in an exciting dialogue from our proper common context - that of a Land sadly torn by war and violence. Our faithful in Israel live in permanent, ongoing dialogue with their Jewish neighbors, a dialogue of life and friendship. In the Palestinian territories, our Catholic institutions (the diocesan seminary, the Catholic University of Bethlehem, etc.) teach our faithful about the Jews and their heritage. Our diocesan commission for relations with the Jewish people is an active organ within the life of our Church, helping us learn more about Jews and Judaism. As Church, we dare to hope that our prayer and witness further justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace and, in furthering these, contribute also to the fraternal dialogue that can and must develop between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land within the specific context we share.

Muslims, Islam and Arab society

Our context

14. We are realistic in the face of the possibilities for dialogue and collaboration with our Muslim brothers and sisters and the difficulties that confront such a project. The concrete reality of Arab society is different from country to country: here we speak from our experience of this reality in the Holy Land, where Christians and Muslims have lived together for almost 1400 years. This society has known many good days and bad ones and is still faced today with important challenges in its search for equilibrium, face to face with modernity, pluralism, democracy and the quest for peace and justice. Our attitude, however, is rooted in the positive teaching of the Church regarding Muslims since the Second Vatican Council¹⁰.

Two principles

15. Two principles animate relations between Muslim and Christian Arabs in the Holy Land¹¹. Firstly, all of us who are Arabs, whether Christian or Muslim, belong to one people, sharing a long history, a language, a culture and a society. Secondly, as Christian Arabs, we are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in Arab and Muslim society. We are called likewise, to be witnesses in Jewish Israeli society too.

The reality

16. In daily life, even though relations between Christians and Muslims are generally good, we are fully aware that there are certain difficulties and challenges that must be confronted. These include mutual ignorance, an authority vacuum that produces insecurity, discrimination and that trend towards Islamization among certain political movements, which endangers not only Christians but also many Muslims who desire an open society¹². When Islamization constitutes an infringement on the liberty of the Christian, we must insist that our identity and our religious liberty be respected. This complexity is sometimes exploited for the political end of dividing the society. However, through dialogue and other

⁸ VATICAN COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (June 24, 1985), n. 25.

⁹ See SABBAAH, MICHEL (LATIN PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM), *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998).

¹⁰ See ECUMENICAL COUNCIL VATICAN II, "Nostra aetate – Declaration on the relationship of the Church to Non-Christian religions," n. 3.

¹¹ See ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES IN THE HOLY LAND, "Our relationship with Muslims" in "Relations with Believers of Other Religions", *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 148-152.

¹² See SABBAAH, MICHEL (LATIN PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM), *Pray for Peace in Jerusalem* (Pentecost 1990), n. 58.

diverse initiatives, Christians and Muslims are called to collaborate with one another in the construction of a common society, founded on principles of mutual respect and responsibilities.

A pedagogy

17. In this situation, we seek to help our Arab faithful, who are the majority of our flock, in integrating and living the complexity of their identity as Christians, as Arabs and as citizens, in Jordan, Palestine and Israel. The fact that Christians are statistically a small community does not, in any way, condemn them to irrelevance or to despair. We encourage all our faithful to take their rightful place in public life and to help build up society in all its domains¹³.

Conclusion: With Muslims and Jews - A vocation

18. We are deeply conscious of the vocation of the Church of Jerusalem to be a Christian presence in the midst of society, be it Muslim Arab or Jewish Israeli. We believe that we are called to be leaven, contributing to the positive resolution of the crises that we are passing through. We are a voice from within our societies whose history, language and culture we share. We seek to be a presence that promotes reconciliation, helping all peoples towards a dialogue that promotes understanding and that will ultimately lead to peace in this Land. "If there is no hope for the poor there will be no hope for anyone, not even the so-called rich."¹⁴

19. As we approach Christmas, brothers and sisters, we address to you our festive greetings. Might this feast be a source of peace in your hearts and in your souls. Merry Christmas! During this holiday season, let us pray to the Christ Messiah, Prince of peace, that he might make of each one of us an artisan of peace, who lives and communicates the peace that is sung by the angels in the skies of our Land. God is the Creator and Redeemer of us all, and in the mystery of this divine sonship brought to realization in us, we are all brothers and sisters, called to practice justice and live in the true peace that God bestows on those who search for it.

December 3, 2003

Signed by the H.B. Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem
+ Michel Sabbah

and members of the diocesan Theological Commission

+ G. Boulos Marcuzzo, Auxiliary Bishop
Frans Bouwen pb
Gianni Caputa sdb
Peter Du Brul sj
D. Jamal Khader
D. Maroun Lahham
Frédéric Manns ofm
David Neuhaus sj
Jean-Michel Poffet op
Thomas Stransky csp

¹³ See ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES IN THE HOLY LAND, "The Christian in Public Life", *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 159-169.

¹⁴ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Gregis: Apostolic Exhortation* (16.10.2003), n. 67.