

Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

Christmas Message 2009



December 22, 2009

“Christmas approaches. Therefore I wish peace and Grace to all the inhabitants of this Holy Land: Palestinians and Israelis, Christians, Muslims, Jews and Druses. I extend these greetings to our faithful in Jordan and Cyprus who are also part of this diocese. The Birth of Christ offers several values to meditate upon: peace, hope, love, sharing, hospitality, compassion and human dignity.”

Christmas Message 2009

First of all, I want to welcome you, all the journalists gathered here today, and thank you for the good but difficult work you perform. Through this work you have the opportunity to seek and serve the truth. Many journalists have paid and continue to pay a real cost to their lives due to their dedication to the truth. Information is not neutral. It has a real ethical dimension. Through informing the readers about what happens in the world, you help them

to have an objective and ethical evaluation of the events themselves. Thank you and welcome.

Christmas approaches. Therefore I wish peace and Grace to all the inhabitants of this Holy Land: Palestinians and Israelis, Christians, Muslims, Jews and Druses. I extend these greetings to our faithful in Jordan and Cyprus who are also part of this diocese. The Birth of Christ offers several values to meditate upon: peace, hope, love, sharing, hospitality, compassion and human dignity.

1. Our dreams for a reconciled Holy Land seem to be utopia. Despite the praiseworthy efforts of politicians and men of good will to find a solution to the ongoing conflict, all of us, Palestinians and Israelis, have all failed in achieving peace. The reality contradicts our dreams. Here are some examples:

A. *Palestinians still do not have their own State* where they can live in peace and harmony with their Israeli neighbors; they still suffer from Occupation, difficult economical situation, destruction of houses in East Jerusalem and internal divisions, thousands of persons living in Jerusalem or Gaza or the Palestinian Territories are waiting for family reunion; one year after Gaza war, Gaza still suffers from economical siege, lack of freedom of movement and from the contamination of its sea and water, which endangers the health of 1.500.000 citizens among which 50% are under the age of 14.

B. *The final status for Jerusalem is still under discussion.* Many changes are taking place in the Holy City which may alter its vocation as a Universal city for three religions and two peoples, making it into an exclusive city. Indeed, Jerusalem is called to be a city of peaceful co-existence between its inhabitants. Unfortunately, the Al Aksa compound recently witnessed confrontations between Fundamentalists Jews who tried to invade Al Haram Al Sharif and the young Palestinians, who wanted to defend their Holy Place. The impact of these regrettable events should not be underestimated.

C. *Israelis live under great fear* which prohibits them from taking courageous decisions to end the conflict. The Separation Wall is a material manifestation of this fear. On another side, we had strongly hoped that the exchange of prisoners between Israelis and Palestinians would succeed and give hope to the Palestinians and Israelis. We feel frustrated by the delay.

2. Nevertheless, our hope is still alive. Hope is the “capacity to see God in the midst of trouble. It encourages us to change the reality in which we find ourselves. Hope means not giving in to evil, but rather standing up to it” (Kairos Palestine Document, 2009). In the Holy Land, everything is not desperate. There are a few signs of hope which are:

A. *The partial freeze on the construction of settlements and the removal of over fifty checkpoints within the West Bank.* This decision from the Israeli Military has markedly improved the freedom of movement for Palestinians and the economic situation. It is not enough, but, a step forward. We hope that other steps may soon follow. On the other hand, Palestinians are more and more expressing resistance in a non violent fashion. It is a positive sign pointing in the right direction.

B. *The generosity of the international community*: the financial support of the international community is a strong sign of hope. After the Gaza war, there came into being a chain of solidarity from governments, churches and individuals. We thank all the donors and promise to pray for them on Christmas.

C. The visit of the Holy Father in May 2009. Pope Benedict was well received in Jordan, Israel and Palestine. A great thanks to the governments of the three countries. He came here as pilgrim of peace and reconciliation. "No more bloodshed! No more fighting! No more terrorism! No more war! Instead let us break the vicious circle of violence." We can add: "No more anti-Semitism, no more Islamophobia, no more fear and hatred". With such words, the Holy Father addressed us during His visit. His different speeches, homilies, meetings and gestures aimed at promoting inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, reconciliation and justice and at encouraging the Christian community to remain in the Holy Land and to take an active role in the life of the Country. We continue to gather fruit from his visit:

a. *The massive arrival of pilgrims*. Last October, according to the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, 330.000 pilgrims visited the Holy Land. The year 2009 will be equal to the year 2000, which was a record in the history of pilgrimages, with 2,700,000 pilgrims.

b. *The construction of a new pediatric Hospital in Bethlehem* named after Benedict XVI, mainly financed by the **John Paul II Foundation** and other church and civil institutions in Italy.

c. *Madaba University in Jordan*. Pope Benedict XVI blessed the cornerstone during his last visit. Such a project will represent our contribution in offering excellence in education as we try to do in Bethlehem University.

d. *Construction of a housing project in Jerusalem for 72 young couples*: Eastern Jerusalem suffers from a severe shortage in housing. Permits are given only with difficulty. Construction is expensive. This project should be a pilot for others.

e. *The courageous decision of Benedict XVI to summon a Synod for the Middle East* to take place in October 2010. This will give us the opportunity to focus again on the big challenges facing the Churches in the Middle East.

f. *The beatification of sister Marie Alphonsine*, foundress of the Rosary Sisters. This great event means that the faithful, with real pride and joy, find in her a model of heroic virtues and an intercessor. I want to highlight the fact that this sister was born in Jerusalem, some meters away from the Latin Patriarchate. She also served in different parishes of the Holy Land, including Jordan. She is a model to follow. We will celebrate her feast each 19th of November.

Conclusion. The best gift we seek, above money and wealth, is peace. It is the wish of all the inhabitants of this Land: Israelis and Palestinians alike. Peace is a gift of God for men of good will. We have to deserve it. We are sure that there are many men and women of good will among Israelis and Palestinians. We pray that one day, the beautiful vision of Isaiah will become a reality: "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be

established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it (...) they shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2: 2-5).

Happy Christmas and a blessed New Year to all of you.

+ **Fouad Twal**, Patriarch.