

'Healing, Hope and Justice for the Holy Land'

Thank you all for being here today with me. I feel privileged to stand among you to share a story of injustice but ultimately a story of continued aspiration for a better tomorrow. Your presence further encourages me, because I feel it is sign of willingness on your part to better understand a reality that plagues the region of the Middle East.

My task is not easy. I am an advocate not only to the Palestinian cause but also to a just solution. I am driven by my national pride and by my Christian value of faith and service.

As you already know, I am Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem, the Holy Land, from the Mother Church. As a child, in 1948, I was made a refugee. I lost my home, and my toys. I felt the extent of loss when my father was unable to explain to me who deserved to sleep in the comfort of my bed and hug my only doll more than me. Along with 750,000 other Palestinians, I found myself dispossessed and homeless, and stripped from my right of a homeland or my right of return to what is rightfully mine.

Today, 64 years later, I am still a refugee in my own city, an internally displaced person. Furthermore, I and my people, the Palestinians, continue to live under the illegal Israeli occupation since 1967, the longest ever recorded in history. This situation is further exacerbated by the failure of the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis, and the internal political strife and division among the Palestinians themselves. The political awakening that started a year ago in Tunisia and spread through many Arab countries has brought new hope for democratic rights. Rulers have been overthrown by the power of the people, promising a new start in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. But

unfortunately, the threat of chaos and widespread conflict is raising too. In this regard, the current situation in Syria is particularly worrying. In Palestine, the changes in the region have contributed to a leadership shift in the Palestinian Authority government and also, renewed hope for the recognition of a Palestinian State. But how those developments would reflect eventually on the Palestinian/Israeli scene remains to be seen.

Yes, we do have many difficult challenges and hurdles that could discourage the enthusiast among us, but we also have many aspirations and hopes that allow us to take one more step towards reconciliation. I am well aware that alone, we are not able to secure enough momentum for change, but I remain hopeful of the commitment of our friends either in pushing the peace agenda forward, and on a personal level, through the support of the work of Church-related NGOs who through their multi-faceted projects convey the possibility of a better tomorrow.

This is neither a research paper nor an academic one. It is a message of hope, a message to reach out to you all. What does life under occupation mean? What are the conditions that the average Palestinian live under? While I cannot detail each and every point, I will attempt to give a brief overview, a glimpse if you will, of those daily challenges.

- **Political Situation:** Israel was created in May 1948, on 78% of historical Palestine. Vibrant Palestinian cities and urban centers ceased to exist, tearing down the fabric of a society rich in traditions and culture. In 1967, the remainder of Palestine fell under Israeli occupation. Till today, even after the Oslo Peace

Accords (September 1993), more than 4 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza live under the tight grip of this injustice. The Israeli occupation seeks to control every aspect of Palestinian life including what remains of its natural resources of land and water. Palestinians do not have control over their borders, air and sea (Gaza). In short, occupation seeks to break the human spirit, demoralize it and rob it of its dignity.

- The Palestinian economy is characterized as a small closed economy with a diminishing industrial and agricultural production base. It is heavily dependent on donors' money to support the budget of the Palestinian National Authority and development projects. Palestine does not freely trade with its neighbors in the Arab world or with Israel. Unemployment is high especially among young university graduates and the unskilled laborers. In the West Bank unemployment was 22.4% in the first half of 2011, with the percentage being higher in the Gaza strip, reaching 33% for the same period¹.

To implement this illegal occupation, Israel resorts to several measures, all in breach of human rights and international laws and the Geneva Convention. Among these are:

- Refusal to dismantle Jewish settlements or even put a freeze on them in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. This aggressive policy of settlement expansion means more expropriation and confiscation of Palestinian land, uprooting of thousands of olive and orchard trees, and building settlers' bypass roads. Jewish settlers roam freely in the West Bank, often terrorizing the local community. They

¹ "Labour market in the West Bank", UNRWA, December 2011 and "Labour market in the Gaza strip", UNRWA, December 2011

have full power and the protection of the Israeli army to close roads, uproot trees, damage crops, and steal produce and cattle. The latest of these incidents, a horse was stolen from young boys, tied to the settler's car who drove away, ending in the death of the horse. The boys were traumatized beyond description and I don't want to know about the anger inside them. How is it possible to create a Palestinian state on lands that are crisscrossed by these settlements? Such expansionist policies make it difficult if not impossible to propagate a two-state solution. (Itamar Incedent). Home Demolitions: As collective punishment and for security reasons, countless Palestinians are left without roofs over their heads, and the comfort of a home. It is a fact that many Palestinian homes are built without permits. Difficult to obtain permits, expensive fees and continuous refusal to grant permits force Palestinians to go ahead and construct their dwellings. With no prior notice, homes are demolished with personal belongings still intact. There is no time or even a court to appeal these decisions. Other than home demolitions, Palestinian families, especially in East Jerusalem in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighborhoods, face the threat of eviction by Jewish families who present themselves holding deeds and documents and protected by the Israeli army. Eviction is immediate. Families and their belongings are literally thrown out while Jewish families immediately move in.

- The Separation Wall built under the pretext of security for Israel. The sad truth remains that bridges of justice are the strongest foundations for a secure co-existence for both Palestinians and Israeli. Furthermore, this Wall is not built on

internationally recognized borders, the armistice line, but rather it cuts through scarce Palestinian land, separating thousands of Palestinians from their farmland and livelihoods and water sources, and confiscating hundreds of acres. The Wall severely curtails movement of people and goods even within the Palestinian territories. These measures restrict access to basic needs and rights of the general population such as education, healthcare, and work.

- Israeli Checkpoints are barriers erected by the Israeli army all over the West Bank and are not only limited to the boundaries that separate Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories. These checkpoints are used to inhibit the movement of people and goods even within Palestinian controlled areas. Harassment, humiliation, and inhumane treatment are normal occurrences. Today there are more than 300 checkpoints, not counting roadblocks. There are several Israeli human rights organizations that observe these checkpoints, such as Mahsoum Watch and Women in Black. Their testimonies alone are enough to cause an outcry.
- Gaza contrary to common belief, was placed under an Israeli siege way before Hamas took over control in 2007. Gaza is one big prison whereby Israel controls who enters or leaves the Gaza strip and goods enter only after obtaining Israeli coordination. In May 2011, Egypt opened its border with the Gaza strip. But the many restrictions imposed on travelers and exports did not improve much

everyday life for Gazans. The War on Gaza in 2009 saw the worst aggression against Gaza. Israel was indiscriminate in using heavy shelling and white phosphorous bombs harming and killing innocent victims for 22 consecutive days and devastating the infrastructure of Gaza. This war came as a response to the home-made rockets fired from northern Gaza into Israel. We condemn any sort of killing, but the root cause was never addressed.

- Jerusalem: No one religion should have exclusivity on Jerusalem. This Holy City belongs to the world, and should always remain an open city where Christians, Muslims and Jews have access to it and its holy sites.

An issue close to my heart is the Palestinian Christian presence and witness in the Holy Land, the living stones. Palestinian Christians are part and parcel of the Palestinian community. Their presence in light of the above difficult living conditions is a challenge on its own. For example, according to a 1945 survey, Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem constituted 19% of the population. Sadly, today that figure stands at 2.55% according to a 2008 study². The percentage of Palestinians Christians living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza is 1.7% of total population, while some studies show that this figure is as low as 1.2%. The reasons for those dwindling figures are clear; Loss of a homeland, continued occupation, continued violations of human rights, declining standard of living, despair, and most importantly, lack of security. This reality redefines the role of the Mother and Universal Church and Church-related organizations in implementing the social doctrine of the Church, while empowering the Christian identity and renew the dedication to seek common good.

² Collins, r., Kassis, R., Raheb, M., editors, "Palestinian Christians: Facts, Figures and Trends", Diyar, 2008

Palestinian Christians, being part of the social, economic, national and political mosaic of the Palestinian people, share in the frustrations, disappointments and aspiration of the Palestinian society. Facing the daily challenges of living under occupation, we also have a unique situation making them more vulnerable to the instability in the region. Palestinian Christians are proud of being members of the Mother Church, and though numbers are dwindling, their uninterrupted presence in the Holy Land for the past two thousand years remains of the outmost importance. Christianity was born in the Holy Land and the people of this land were the first to bear witness to the message that reached the end of the worlds. But what are the challenges that are unique to this community?

- Rise of fundamentalism all over the Middle East, forming political movements that are gaining momentum especially that other alternatives have failed the people. Muslim, Christian and Jewish fundamentalism is marginalizing the role of the moderate voices in their respective communities. Today, in Iraq, the world is witnessing the hemorrhage of Iraqi Christians fleeing from their homeland and leaving behind a Church rich in traditions and beliefs. It is no longer an emigration to improve standard of living but rather to protect lives. Since the revolution, Egypt has seen several deadly riots targeting Coptic Christians and we are fearing violent escalation in Syria that would threaten the Christian community there. Fundamentalism is also on the rise in the Holy land, but the effect is limited and there have been isolated incidents targeting Palestinian Christians. But in general, and especially that Palestinian Christians are seen as part of the national struggle, involved in every step of it, harassments based on

fundamentalist ideas are far and apart. Palestinian Christian participation in all aspects of Palestinian life, and their contribution economically, socially, politically, and culturally is disproportionate to their numbers, thus their positive influence and presence is noted. To name a few, Edwards Sa'ed, Afif Safieh, Hanan Ashrawi, Patriarch Michel Sabbah, May Ziadeh, and Said Khoury.

Though fundamentalism is a major concern, I believe tolerance towards Christians in the Holy Land is good especially that the Church and its organizations are present on the ground serving on grass root levels. Christian schools and universities, clinics, hospitals, old-age homes, and social and charitable programs are but some examples of that witness of our faith.

- Division of the Church and the multiple church families. This mosaic complicates church interactions at higher and pastoral levels, as well as posing several difficulties in setting a strategy of action to benefit the whole community. The four major families, the Orthodox Church, the Eastern Church, the Evangelist Church, and the Catholic Church, are further subdivided, to include several denominations. For example, the Catholic Church includes the Latin, the Melkite, the Maronite, the Armenian Catholic, the Syrian Catholic, and the Chaldean Churches. The good news is that at the community level, it is more ecumenical and the division is not as pronounced. There are many initiatives and efforts, such as Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, and HCEF (Holy Land

Christian Ecumenical Foundation), that attempt to strengthen the ecumenical movement among the different churches by creating points of unity, opening dialogue, and exchange.

- Religious freedom and liberty is further curtailed by the Israelis. It is not an issue of beliefs and faith, but rather the freedom to practice this faith and take part in centuries old traditions. Palestinian Christians in the West Bank cannot visit the holy sites in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Tiberias, or any place within Israel except with difficult to obtain permit issued by the Israel. Usually these are day passes given only during religious holidays, such as Christmas, and Easter that expire at sundown. Many Palestinian youth have not visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, nor the Garden of Gethsemane, or Mount of Beatitudes. Furthermore, Israel follows measures that forbid Palestinian Christians to participate in religious feasts that have become more of a tradition. Tradition calls for all Christians to gather in and around the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Orthodox Holy Saturday to wait for the holy light to come out of the tomb of Jesus. Candles and lanterns are immediately lit and spread to homes and all Christian localities and abroad announcing the resurrection of Jesus. On such a significant occasion, Israel closes entrances to the old city of Jerusalem, selectively choosing who enters and who does not.

- Emigration remains the toughest of all challenges. Countless articles, studies, interviews, as well as my personal opinion concludes that “today, emigration is particularly prevalent because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the resulting instability in the region”³. The Synod of Bishops held in the Vatican in December 2010 also point out that “international politics oftentimes pays no attention to the existence of Christians, and the fact that they are victims, at times the first to suffer, goes unnoticed”⁴. Another cause of emigration is directly linked to the economic situation and the difficulty of attaining an acceptable standard of living. A report prepared by the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung in Ramallah emphasizes that social factors also play an important role especially that most Palestinian Christians belong to the urban middle class. Armed with a good education, and often bi-lingual, this group find it easy to emigrate, making use of the available “international diaspora network”⁵. Another reason is attributed to psychological factors. Minorities feel insecure in an environment that is not democratic and where “pluralism, legal certainty and human rights are often limited”⁶. In 2007 US congressman Henry Hyde stated in a letter to President George Bush that “the Christian community is being crushed in the mill of bitter Israel-Palestinian conflict and that expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were irreversibly damaging the dwindling Christian community”. On February 19, 2011, 14 out of 15 members of the UN Security Council voted in

³ Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly For The Middle East, “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness”, INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS, Vatican City, 2010

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Dane, F., Knocha, J., “The Role and Influence of Christians in the Palestinian Territories”, Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, Ramallah, December 2010

⁶ *ibid*

favor of a draft resolution reaffirming the illegality of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and calling for immediate halt to construction. The resolution failed to pass as the Obama administration exercised its veto power.

To me, as a member of the Mother Church, emigration is not only the physical act of movement, but more profoundly it is the “emigration of dream” as coined by Dr. Jamal Nassar in his speech “Globalization, Religion and Terrorism”⁷

Is the Palestinian Christian presence in the Holy Land vital? The Synod of Bishops says: “It would indeed be a loss for the universal Church, if Christianity were to disappear or be diminished in the very place where it was born”¹. Described as “indigenous citizens” by the Synod, it emphasizes that “their disappearance would impoverish the pluralism which has always characterized the countries in the Middle East”¹.

What measures can the Universal and Mother Church, as well as church-related organizations take in an effort to combat these challenges? Do keep in mind that already so much is being done, but the task at hand requires so much more commitment and support. The Mother Church cannot survive on its own in face of its surmounting responsibilities.

- Change starts from within. A culture of peace has to slowly spread, first within ourselves and our own community, for “blessed are the peacemakers”. Armed with this culture, dialogue with the Israelis becomes more fruitful. Caritas

⁷ Nassar, J., Dr., “Globalization, Religion and Terrorism”, Third International Conference on Violence, Nonviolence and Religion, February 2001

Jerusalem has always adopted this and implements it through the growing volunteer youth program. This seed of peace is implanted in their being but we need to make sure that it continues to grow within.

- As a minority living among a Palestinian Muslim majority, it becomes our responsibility to seek an open dialogue with our brothers and sisters. This fosters understanding, and respecting the beliefs of others, leading to acceptance. This open dialogue occurs on daily basis at Bethlehem University, a Catholic institution, and countless Christian schools whose majority of students are Muslims. What better and fertile ground to nurture respect for the oneness of a community with its unique differences. The Synod Fathers called for Christians in the Middle East “to pursue a fruitful dialogue of life with Muslims.....and together combating every sort of fundamentalism and violence in the name of religion”. Sharing the responsibility of building a society, Christian and Muslims are further encouraged respect the human dignity, seek equal rights and insure religious freedom, both freedom of practice and worship and freedom of conscience. Such dialogue has to extend to include Jews especially that the conflict is not one of religion but rather a political one.
- The Synod Fathers called upon for “the commitment to support and insist on international law and respect for all people”. This can be achieved through the implementation of United Nations Resolutions 194, 242 and 383, guaranteeing

right of return of refugees, ending occupation over the territories seized in 1967, and settling on the special status of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

- Encourage pilgrimages to the Holy Land and not only to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, but also to familiarize themselves with the rich traditions of the Mother Church through meeting Palestinian Christians, the living stones.
- Acknowledging the importance of Christian schools and institutions, the Synod Fathers call for the continuation of educating the youth who are the future, “in Christ’s spirit, in human and Gospel values, and consolidating a culture of openness , care and concern for the poor”.
- Fostering and nurturing the needs of the youth, instilling in them the importance of being active members of the Mother Church, their community, and their society at large. As Palestinian Christians, youth form a vibrant fabric of society and have the right to feel that they belong to their homeland. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the XXV World Youth Day March 2010), encourages the youth saying: “Despite these difficulties, do not let yourself be discouraged, and do not give up on your dreams! Instead, cultivate all the more your heart’s great desire for fellowship, justice and peace”.

Conclusion:

As much as I would have liked to end on a positive note, I find it difficult. As I was going through old writings of mine, mostly reflections, I found the following written in April 1997, almost fifteen years ago: “In these days, our world needs peace and justice. There is great confusion about what peace is and what justice is for this people or that. No peace or justice or security for one people can be built at the expense of others. Today in the Middle East, we face an unpredictable and dangerous situation caused by the deterioration of the peace process. Palestinians and Israelis have begun to lose faith in one another”.

Furthermore, I feel that we have failed the younger generation. This is how my seventeen year old grandson introduced himself to one of the universities in his application essay. “A Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem, I was born close to the birth of the Oslo Peace Accord, and grew up with the hope of a just solution and prosperity. I witnessed the disappointing collapse of peace talks, and now, I will graduate from high school under the cloud of a political stalemate and internal Palestinian strife”.

We cannot afford to remain idle. The task ahead seems to be difficult and complex. I personally do not believe so. We, the Palestinian people have recognized the State of Israel in 1988, and today we have accepted and acknowledged the fact that an independent Palestinian state has to co-exist alongside Israel based on the two-state solution on 22% of historic Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital. It is a sacred responsibility that we owe to the younger generations. It is our responsibility to lay the

foundations for a prosperous and secure country. It is in this spirit that President Mahmoud Abbas went to the United Nations General Assembly last September, to prove the world that Palestine is ready and willing to exist peacefully along its neighbours.

Today, you also have an important role to play. You have a voice that can be heard in your country and in the United Nations. I was touched by the widespread campaign in New Zealand to support the recognition of the Palestinian state at the UN. Your genuine and honest commitment makes a difference to us. You can become advocates to what is right. Without justice there is no peace, and without peace there is no security. Without justice and peace, there is no possible way for reconciliation. Rest assured that there is no peace for one party, because peace is for both people. There isn't one winner and one loser. Either we win together or loose together.

I am a firm believer that the Mother Church and the Universal Church are like two lungs. One needs the other to function well and prosper. We need you and we put a lot of hope on you and on what you can do to make a difference in the Holy Land. I am here to open an ear, reach a heart, and change an attitude. But ultimately, I feel that the international community bears a responsibility towards achieving justice for the Palestinian people so that peace can prevail.