

A Message from Jerusalem Christians

Your Holiness,

We, the indigenous faithful Christians of Jerusalem, join our voices to those of our Palestinian Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters in the West Bank and Gaza to welcome you on your much desired pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Your Holiness, your pilgrimage for peace, comes at a very critical moment in the history of the Palestinian people. For this reason, religious institutions and members of the civil society have communicated to Your Holiness, their concerns and aspirations prior to your arrival in the country. We, “*the little flock*” of Jerusalem would have loved to celebrate with joy your presence among us, but as your experience in Jerusalem in the past few days has proved, we are not free and our rights are denied.

We are pleased that you have insisted on coming at this time to give spiritual support and guidance to the steadfast Christians of Jerusalem, the resilient faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ and His Church established in this city over 2000 years ago. Sad to say, there are only about 9000 Christians of various denominations left but they form an integral part of the rich fabric of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, the city of peace anxiously awaiting a just peace for all.

Your Holiness, you have in the past two days, observed the ramifications of the 42-year old military occupation of this city significant to all faiths. Christians and Muslims suffer the same violations of human and national rights because Jerusalem is under occupation. As the Vatican has recognized: “the part of the city militarily occupied in 1967 and annexed and declared the capital of the State of Israel, IS OCCUPIED TERRITORY (as recorded and confirmed by the United Nations) As such, all Israeli measures which exceed the power of a belligerent occupant under international law are therefore null and void”. This courageous stand of the Vatican should be upheld and prayerfully acted upon in order to end the illegal monopolization and the unilateral judaization of Jerusalem, strangulated by settlements, divided by road blocks and checkpoints. Families are separated because of the wall; residents lose their residency rights; married couples are denied family reunification and homes are demolished! Young people who raise their voices against injustice are thrown into prison and the sanctity of life is desecrated. The beautiful mosaic of Jerusalem is shattered under oppression and injustice.

How can your flock be spiritually empowered and guided when faced with the violation of their rights to worship, to move, to learn, and to return home. How can your flock remain steadfast and continue resisting non-violently? How can we secure jobs and housings for the young people so that they will not lose hope and emigrate? How can we

encourage our children in exile to risk coming back to their country and contribute to maintaining the uniqueness of the Christian presence without being denied entry?

Your pilgrimage to the sites made holy by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, not only constitutes a rich spiritual experience, but, is made especially meaningful through the sharing of the sufferings of the people who also make this land holy. We count on Your Holiness, to proclaim anew to the world the teachings of our Savior “*to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favor.*”(Luke 4; 18-19)

Your Holiness, you come as a peacemaker to promote tolerance and reconciliation. We urge you to continue following in the courageous footsteps of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in daring to raise a prophetic voice and to state clearly that:

- Jerusalem must remain an open city to all faiths and be the shared capital of the two states.
- The occupation has to end.
- Israel has to abide by International Law, implement UN resolutions and be held accountable for all violations especially the most recent brutal onslaught on Gaza.

Two thousand years ago, from the Mt. of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, Jesus wept over the city, under occupation and torn apart by violence and dissent. “*You do not know the things that make for peace!*” That cry resonates in Jerusalem to-day, still under occupation and shattered by the absence of tolerance, respect and love.

We trust that your prayers and your genuine desire for peace in Jerusalem will drive Your Holiness and the world that looks up to your leadership to work for a just peace for all. Only then can Christians, Muslims and Jews live in freedom and in harmony in the promising land for all. Only then can the inhabitants of this blessed land enjoy a just peace that they very much deserve.

In closing, we welcome Your Holiness with the Arabic greeting “Ahlan wa Sahlan” which literally means you are among family and that your stay goes smoothly.
