



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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February 1, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
2201 C Street
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I congratulate you on your recent confirmation as Secretary of State. May your tenure mark a continuation of the long standing engagement between the State Department and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

I write to offer insights on Israel and Palestine based on my recent solidarity visit there along with bishops from Europe, Canada, South Africa and the United States. Our communiqué is enclosed.

The year 2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of a crippling occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, crippling for both peoples. In the words of our communiqué, the occupation violates “the human dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis.” Settlement expansion on occupied Palestinian lands undermines a two-state solution, destroying the homes and the livelihoods of Palestinians as well as the long-term security and future of Israelis. I echo the call of Pope Francis:

I implore those in positions of responsibility to leave no stone unturned in the search for equitable solutions to complex problems, so that Israelis and Palestinians may live in peace. The path of dialogue, reconciliation and peace must constantly be taken up anew, courageously and tirelessly.

The route of the Israeli barrier in the Cremisan Valley near Bethlehem in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is an example of how occupation and land confiscations undermine peace, and in this case the Christian presence. The Cremisan Valley is home to a Salesian monastery, convent and school, and the agricultural lands of 58 Christian families who live in nearby Palestinian towns. The building of the wall constricts residents’ movement, impairs access to their lands, separates Christian institutions from those they serve, and encourages Christian emigration. The Cremisan Valley is emblematic of the alarming number of Palestinians who have lost their homes and livelihoods. Settlement expansion, confiscation of lands and the building of the Separation Wall on Palestinian lands violate international law and undermine a diplomatic solution.

Letter to Secretary of State Tillerson

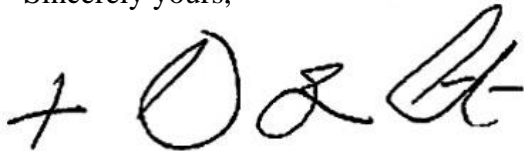
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USCCB has long supported a two-state solution, a “secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside a viable and independent Palestinian state.” For this reason, we implore you to maintain the U.S. embassy in Tel-Aviv. Relocating the embassy to Jerusalem is tantamount to recognizing Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel. In fact, decades ago, the international community determined that the status of Jerusalem is to be decided in negotiations as mutually agreed by Israel and Palestine. Moving the embassy to Jerusalem would erode the U.S. commitment to a two-state solution, and is a threat to pursuing peace and ending conflict. Its impact would incite and destabilize the area, compromising U.S. security. As Pope Francis declares, “the two-state solution must become a reality and not merely a dream.” The Holy See’s recent recognition of the State of Palestine promotes a two-state solution in which Jerusalem is in the words of Pope Francis “preserved as the capital of the three religions, as a point of reference, as a city of peace.”

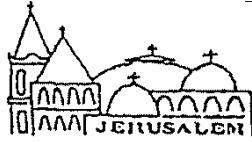
Mr. Secretary, resolving the long-standing conflict will require arduous work. It will necessitate critical, continued engagement if we are to end fifty years of occupation and build a brighter future for both peoples. It has been fifty years of tumult and turbulence, of egregious injustices and random acts of violence. However, the United States has always provided leadership and support to the peace process. We continue to profess hope for a diplomatic solution that respects the human dignity of both Israelis and Palestinians and advances justice and peace for all.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oscar Cantú', written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Encl.



Holy Land Coordination 2017 communiqué

Fifty years of occupation demands action

For fifty years the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza have languished under occupation, violating the human dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis. This is a scandal to which we must never become accustomed.

Our Coordination has called for justice and peace every year since 1998, yet the suffering continues. So this call must get louder. As Bishops we implore Christians in our home countries to recognise our own responsibility for prayer, awareness and action.

So many people in the Holy Land have spent their entire lives under occupation, with its polarising social segregation, yet still profess hope and strive for reconciliation. Now, more than ever, they deserve our solidarity.

We all have a responsibility to oppose the construction of settlements. This de facto annexation of land not only undermines the rights of Palestinians in areas such as Hebron and East Jerusalem but, as the UN recently recognised, also imperils the chance of peace.

We all have a responsibility to provide assistance for the people of Gaza, who continue to live amid a man-made humanitarian catastrophe. They have now spent a decade under blockade, compounded by a political impasse caused by ill-will on all sides.

We all have a responsibility to encourage non-violent resistance which, as Pope Francis reminds us, has achieved great changes across the world. This is particularly necessary in the face of injustices such as the continued construction of the separation wall on Palestinian land including the Cremisan Valley.

We all have a responsibility to promote a two-state solution. The Holy See has emphasised that *“if Israel and Palestine do not agree to exist side-by-side, reconciled and sovereign within mutually agreed and internationally recognised borders, peace will remain a distant dream and security an illusion.”*

We all have a responsibility to help the local Church, its agencies, volunteers and NGOs. In the most testing circumstances they show great resilience and carry out life-changing work. It is our faith in God that gives us hope. It is the witness of Christians in the Holy Land and especially the young people we met that inspires us.

The Bible tells us: *“You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country’s inhabitants” [Leviticus 25:10].* During this fiftieth year of occupation we must pray for the liberty of everyone in the Holy Land and practically support all those working to build a just peace.

Bishop Declan Lang, England and Wales (Chair of the Holy Land Coordination)
Archbishop Riccardo Fontana, Italy
Bishop Stephen Ackermann, Germany
Bishop Peter Bürcher, Bishops' Conference of the Nordic Countries
Bishop Oscar Cantú, United States of America
Bishop Christopher Chessun, Church of England
Bishop Michel Dubost, France
Bishop Lionel Gendron, Canada
Bishop Felix Gmür, Switzerland
Bishop Nicholas Hudson, Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community
Bishop William Kenney, England and Wales
Bishop William Nolan, Scotland

With the support of:

Mgr. Duarte da Cunha, Council of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe
Fr. Peter-John Pearson, South African Bishops' Conference