



**SPEAKING A WORD OF HOPE AT A CRITICAL TIME FOR THE HOLY LAND:
COMMUNIQUE OF THE
COORDINATION OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES
IN SUPPORT OF THE CHURCH IN THE HOLY LAND
January 16, 2008
Jerusalem -- Rome**

In a year when the world has focused renewed attention on a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the Coordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church in the Holy Land has just returned from our eighth visit to the Holy Land to walk in solidarity with the local Church and its bishops and to support the search for a just peace. The Coordination represents Catholic bishops' conferences of Europe and North America and was formed in Jerusalem in 1998 at the request of the Holy See.

Our first task as bishops and pastors was to offer our prayerful presence and encouragement to a suffering Church. It was a great joy to visit and pray with local Catholics in parishes throughout the Holy Land. We also listened to their stories of struggle and their hopes for the future of their land. We admire their faith and courage and encourage Catholics in our own nations to come on pilgrimage to the Holy Land—visiting both the holy places and the living Catholic communities that witness to Christ in the land of his birth.

We recognise that the social, political and humanitarian situation in Israel and Palestine is complex and that solutions to the conflict are not easily found. Many people we met were pessimistic about current efforts by the leaders of Israel and Palestine, with the support of the international community, to reach an agreement on a just peace. But we also heard from many that they yearn for a future of freedom, peace and security—for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Coming from various nations in Europe and North America, we need to examine what in the attitudes and policies of our countries contributes to division instead of leading to peace and justice for both peoples. Too often countries have taken sides in the dispute when in fact the fate of both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, is inextricably linked. Our nations can at times be part of the problem; but they can also be part of the solution.

We found signs of hope in our visit to the Holy Land. We met young people at Bethlehem University and in various parishes. At the University, Christians and Muslims study together harmoniously. We were impressed by their commitment to their studies, their energy and enthusiasm, their wish to stay in the land of their birth, and their hope for a just peace that will bring them, and all people of the Holy Land, a better future. We also heard of growing interreligious cooperation for peace among Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Tragically we also saw signs of discouragement and division. The separation wall through which we passed was a vivid reminder of the security concerns of Israel as well as the deepening division between ordinary Israelis and Palestinians who lack the human contact that can help foster justice and reconciliation. We heard moving stories of how the wall compounds suffering and compromises human dignity by separating families, devastating the Palestinian economy and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. We are particularly concerned for the dire humanitarian

situation in Gaza, which has worsened since we visited there a year ago. A frequent refrain was a call to respect the basic human rights of all, including security for Israelis and security and freedom for Palestinians.

Earlier this month our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, said in an address to the Diplomatic Corps: “I am glad that the Annapolis Conference pointed towards the abandonment of partisan or unilateral solutions, in favour of a global approach respectful of the rights and legitimate interests of all the peoples of the region. I appeal once more to the Israelis and the Palestinians to concentrate their energies on the implementation of commitments made on that occasion, and to expedite the process that has happily been restarted. Moreover, I invite the international community to give strong support to these two peoples and to understand their respective sufferings and fears.” (January 7, 2008)

Our pastoral visit to the Holy Land convinced us that this is a crucial moment for Israel, Palestine and the international community. It is a time of both opportunity and danger. Our sincere hope and prayer is that the leaders and peoples of Israel and Palestine, with the full support and encouragement of our own nations and the international community, will find a path to a just peace. The evidence of our eyes and ears does not always make us optimistic, but God’s grace gives us hope. The Coordination of Episcopal Conferences looks forward to return visits to the Church in the Holy Land and to the day when all peoples of this land can live in peace, security and dignity.

Signatories:

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