



Bishops Call for Human Dignity as Basis of Peace
Statement of the Co-ordination of Bishops' Conferences
in support of the Church in the Holy Land, 15 January 2015

We came to pray with and support the Christian community and to promote peace and human dignity in this divided land.

We witnessed the tragic consequences of the failure of both local and international politicians to advance peace. Human dignity is given by God and is absolute. The ongoing conflict assaults the dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis, but in a particular way our commitment to the poor calls us to lift up the suffering people in Gaza. A year ago, we called Gaza “a man-made disaster, a shocking scandal, an injustice that cries out to the human community for a resolution.” In the wake of the terrible destruction caused by last year's war, our presence reminded the small Christian community that they are not forgotten.

Many tens of thousands of families in Gaza lack adequate shelter. In the latest freezing weather, at least two infants died of exposure. The continuing blockade dramatically impedes rebuilding and contributes to desperation that undermines Israelis' legitimate hope for security. It also creates intolerable levels of unemployment and pushes ordinary people into deeper poverty.

Despite the devastation, the appalling scenes of destruction we saw, and the fears of another war we heard, hope is alive in Gaza. We saw families resolutely rebuilding their lives. We witnessed a small Christian community that has enormous faith. We admired the tenacity of many volunteers. We visited Holy Family School where Muslims and Christians study and play together in harmony. We met with the Holy Rosary Sisters, who true to their co-foundress Marie-Alphonsine, to be canonized a saint this year by Pope Francis, exercise a prophetic ministry of education. We celebrated Mass with the Sisters of the Bethlehem Carmel. Their foundress Mariam Baouardy, another Palestinian whose life testifies to the holiness that still emanates from this Land, also will be canonized.

Political leaders must defend the human dignity of the people in Gaza. One student poignantly told us that he received an email during the war asking if he needed food or clothing or shelter. Without bitterness, he replied that what he needed was dignity. People of good will on both sides of the conflict want the same thing, a dignified life worthy of the human person.

In the coming months we will continue to oppose the building of the proposed wall in the Cremisan Valley. It would result in the loss of the lands and livelihoods of many Christian families. This situation is tragically a microcosm of the reality of the land issue. We will also continue to oppose expansion of the settlement program, illegal under international law, which we witnessed acutely in Hebron. Its impact on the freedom of movement of Palestinians and the confiscation of lands is simply unjust.

After the failed negotiations and ensuing violence of 2014, we urge public officials to be creative, to take new approaches, to build bridges, not walls. We must humanize the

conflict by fostering more interaction between Israelis and Palestinians. Peace will only come when all parties respect the fact that the Holy Land is sacred to three faiths and home to two peoples.

Aware that this year we walk in the footsteps of Pope Francis, we take to heart his recent statement to the Diplomatic Corps:

“My thoughts turn above all to the Middle East, beginning with the beloved land of Jesus which I had the joy of visiting last May, and for whose peace we constantly pray. We did this with extraordinary intensity, together with the then President of Israel, Shimon Peres, and the President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, inspired by a confident hope that negotiations between the two parties will once more resume, for the sake of ending violence and reaching a solution which can enable Palestinians and Israelis alike to live at last in peace within clearly established and internationally recognized borders, thus implementing the ‘two state solution’.”

The path to peace demands respect for the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians. Our prayer nurtures the hope that makes peace possible. We call on all Christians to pray for the Jews, Christians and Muslims of this Land we call Holy.

Bishop Stephen Ackermann, Germany
Archbishop Stephen Brislin, South Africa
Bishop Raymond Browne, Ireland
Bishop Peter Bürcher, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden
Bishop Oscar Cantú, United States of America
Bishop Christopher Chessun, Church of England
Bishop Michel Dubost, France
Archbishop Ricardo Fontana, Italy
Bishop Lionel Gendron, Canada
Bishop Felix Gmur, Switzerland
Archbishop Patrick Kelly, England and Wales
Bishop William Kenney, England and Wales, COMECE
Bishop Declan Lang, England and Wales
Bishop Kieran O'Reilly, Ireland
Bishop Thomas Maria Renz, Germany
Archbishop Joan Enric Vives, Spain

Editors' notes:

Since 1998, the Co-ordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church of the Holy Land has met at the invitation of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. Expressly mandated by the Holy See, the Holy Land Co-ordination meets every January in the Holy Land, focusing on prayer, pilgrimage and persuasion with the aim of acting in solidarity with the Christian community as it experiences intense political and social-economic pressure.