

Department of International Affairs

THE HOLY LAND 2000 Notes for Pilgrimages

This booklet contains notes on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Christian communities there, and inter-religious links. Practical suggestions and a list of contacts are also provided.

The nature of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is far more than tourism. Pilgrimage can be a profound expression of faith, is carried out in a religious spirit, perhaps in penitence, but joyfully also. Throughout the Middle Ages, pilgrims walked or rode on horseback across Europe to Northern Spain, to visit the tomb of St James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela. One of the first great works of English literature, written in the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, brings together a group of vivid characters in a shared experience of pilgrimage, each in turn telling a story. Today, devout Muslims from all over the world will make sacrifices for many years, saving to visit Mecca and regarding the pilgrimage as a highpoint of their lives.

A Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a privileged opportunity to come to know the land where Jesus was born, preached and healed, suffered, died and rose again: and to visit the land from which the Gospel spread to the whole world. To walk in the steps of Jesus, with equal openness to the movement in us of the Holy Spirit, can renew our Christian lives. Pilgrims can be changed by their experience.

Christian pilgrims, whether travelling alone or in groups, are carrying out an act of the Church. It is good that they bear in mind that their visit is not only to a series of geographical locations, of places and buildings held sacred, but also to the living Church of that locality. The Church is the Body of Christ, and this central image expresses the belief that we are deeply united with all members of the Church, across generations and across frontiers. One of the greatest benefits of pilgrimage is to allow us to experience this unity in a more immediate and vivid way.

There have been Christian communities in the Holy Land ever since the time of Jesus. The first key deliberation about the future mission Jesus's followers, recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, is commonly known as the Council of Jerusalem. So the Church of Jerusalem was the 'Mother Church', to which other early Christian communities looked for guidance.

Christian communities in the Holy Land

There has never ceased to be a Christian community in the Holy Land, right up to our own day. But the plight of contemporary Christians there is a harsh one, marked by great suffering and enduring poverty. These pressures have led to a sharp reduction in the numbers of Christians, and the conditions of life provoke continuing emigration. As a small minority, faced with the prospect of becoming still fewer, Christians need the experience of community with the world-wide Church. We, the Bishops of England and Wales, therefore hope that pilgrims to the Holy Land will take the opportunity to build relationships of solidarity with the local churches there.

There are Anglican and Lutheran communities in the Holy Land, but the great majority of Christians are either Catholic or Orthodox. The Catholics are divided about equally between Greek and Latin Catholics. The Latin Patriarch, His Eminence Michel Sabbah (himself a Palestinian), lives in Jerusalem. Care of the Holy Places themselves is shared between Orthodox and Catholic communities, which have sustained a prayerful presence there for centuries.

Inter-religious links

Jerusalem is a city sacred to the adherents of three faiths, Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity. All have a profound and ancient attachment to the city. Naturally members of the three faiths differ on many fundamental matters, and so do their traditions. Each faith community has its own precious customs, such as a different holy day each week (the bustling city of Jerusalem is amazingly quiet on the Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath). Yet for all of them, Abraham is their 'father in faith'. Jesus himself was a practising Jew: the later founders of Islam in turn respected him profoundly as a prophet. Members of all three faiths worship the One God, listen to the divine word instructing them in Scripture, have for centuries lived side by side in the same land, and know that they must resolve their problems together or not at all.

For this reason, while affirming their own Christian identity, uniting themselves to the local Christian churches and beginning to understand their concerns, Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land must show a profound respect for other faiths and their members. Every visitor to Jerusalem ought to embody the spirit of respectful openness and dialogue. Some groups will have the opportunity of accepting home hospitality, for example with observant Jews on the Sabbath. Others could arrange to meet inter-faith groups, or peace groups which bring together Israelis and Palestinians.

The attitude of respect is especially important since the region's enduring political problems have often been superficially and inaccurately interpreted as expressions of direct religious conflict.

Practical Suggestions

• The spirit of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage involves a willingness to be prayerful, to connect the people met and the sights seen to one's own practice of faith. In this way, pilgrims will be open to 'conversion', to a changed life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it is good to seek a balance between legitimate elements of tourism (relaxation, shopping, etc.) and the primary purpose of this form of journey - pilgrimage. So, for example, an all-day sight-seeing trip on a Sunday would probably prevent the group's sharing worship with the local Christian community - even if the pilgrim group were at some point to celebrate Mass by itself.

• Accommodation

Some groups might seek meals and accommodation in pilgrim hostels or guest-houses rather than in commercial hotels - which can sometimes be cut off from the local economy. Using such guest-houses can support the precarious economy of Christian life. Without prejudice to others it is worth considering patronising known Christian businesses. The majority of Christians in the Holy Land live under severe economic disadvantage, and the Palestinian economy urgently needs support. The patronage of pilgrim groups can stimulate economic and cultural development.

• Guides

A pilgrimage can be led by an accredited guide, someone not only knowledgeable about the sites to be visited but appreciative of the priorities and sensitivities of Christian pilgrims. Many groups report that their guides are exemplary, some have said that their guides seemed reluctant to enter certain areas, perhaps on ideological grounds. There are very few places, however, where a guide is positively required, and some groups might best meet their needs by ensuring that their leader has attended suitable familiarisation courses. In any case, it will be desirable for a person to be present who can serve as a competent spiritual guide.

As implied in the previous point, the choice of tour guides (and therefore of tour operators) is a delicate one, and pilgrimage organisers need to consider the matter carefully. The vast majority

of licensed tour-guides in the Holy Land are Israelis, and this disparity illustrates how issues of justice reach even into the realm of pilgrimage.

• Religious and cultural contacts

Those planning the pilgrimage could obtain a calendar of cultural and religious events, for example that published by the Office for the Great Jubilee of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. Other calendars are published by both the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and the Palestinian Authority.

Such bodies as the Notre Dame Pilgrim Centre, the Catholic Information Centre in Jerusalem, and Ecce Homo Convent will often be able to introduce groups to local churches and institutions, and with local people (whether Jews, Muslims or Christians) who can assist the group to learn more of current conditions of life in the Holy Land. Similarly, groups could participate in lectures, seminars, and sessions of inter-religious dialogue. Such events are conducted, for example, by the various institutes listed at the end of this leaflet. (Travellers should be aware that officials at Israel's international airport might well ask departing visitors in detail about their local contacts, especially those with Palestinians.)

Some effort could well be made to make visit shrines and historic places of importance to both Jews and Muslims, and to contact their religious organisations. For example, a visit to Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial, will help visitors towards an understanding of the consciousness and aspirations of contemporary Israelis. Similarly, the Pontifical Mission Office can help to arrange visits to important Muslim religious sites such as the Haram el Sharif (the Dome of the Rock) and the Al-Aqsa mosque.

• Security

For many reasons, the Holy Land can be a tense environment. Guides and tour agencies have a strict obligation to be alert to security concerns, and groups must respect their knowledge. This does not mean that groups should accept undue restrictions about where to walk, for example, or where to shop. Pilgrimage in a spirit of openness, with a view to solidarity and reconciliation, might well involve some crossing of boundaries.

Some Useful Contacts

Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land

PO Box 14152, Notre Dame of Jerusalem Centre, Jerusalem 91141

For schedules of events and admissions to them, contacts with the local churches.

Bethlehem University

PO Box, Rue des Frères, Bethlehem

A Christian university, sponsored by the Vatican and staffed by the de la Salle Brothers, it offers educational opportunities, especially to Palestinians and Arab Israelis, both Christian and Muslim. The university is able to host pilgrim groups and arrange meetings with students and faculty.

Christian Information Centre

PO Box 14308 (Jaffa Gate, Old City), Jerusalem 91140

Offers information on religious events throughout the country: opening hours, Mass times, addresses for religious institutions, etc. Sells maps, travel guides.

Ecce Homo Convent

PO Box 19056 (via Dolorosa 41), Jerusalem 91190

Run by the Sisters of Sion, a pleasant venue in East Jerusalem and itself a pilgrimage site. It offers courses throughout the year according to the needs of participants, and especially for those who can stay somewhat longer than is possible on pilgrimage tours.

Ecumenical Institute, Tantur

PO Box 19556, Jerusalem 91194

Founded by Pope Paul VI after his pilgrimage in 1964. It runs courses for scholars, undergraduates, persons on sabbatical. Its focus is on ecumenical and inter-religious relationships, especially between Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Institute of St Peter of Sion, Ratisbonne

*Centre for Christian-Jewish Studies, PO Box 7336,
Shmuel Hanagid St 26, Jerusalem 91027*

Run by the Brothers and Priests of the Religious of Sion, it provides study courses in the cultural, historical and religious context of ancient and modern Judaism, especially with a view to understanding the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

PO Box 14152, Latin Patriarchate Road, Jerusalem

If requested in advance by tour agencies, the Patriarchate can provide pilgrims with certificates confirming their completion of the pilgrimage. The current Patriarch is His Eminence Michel Sabbah.

The Melitz Centre for Interfaith Encounter with Israel

19 Yishai St, Abu Tor, Jerusalem 93544

Offers to Christian and interfaith groups programmes (including study tours) which enable them to explore the meaning of Israel for Jews, Christians and Muslims, on religious, historical and political levels. In Britain, contact can be made through the Council of Christians and Jews.

Middle East Council of Churches

Jerusalem Liaison Office, PO Box 14634, Jerusalem 91146

Can provide information about events, contacts and issues relating to ecumenical and inter-faith matters.

Notre Dame of Jerusalem Centre

Opposite New Gate, Old City, Jerusalem

A pilgrim hospice and a key centrally-located meeting place for Christians visiting Jerusalem. Evening Prayer and Mass are offered daily. A new cultural centre has recently been opened.

Pontifical Mission

Old City, Jerusalem

Founded in 1949 by Pope Pius XII, to assist refugees and displaced persons following the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. It supports charitable, medical, educational and cultural programmes, as well as schools for the disabled and deaf in Bethlehem.

St Peter Gallicantu

Mount Zion Gate, Old City, Jerusalem

A beautifully restored site, traditionally known as the place of Jesus's imprisonment and his denial by Peter. Facilities include a hostel for young adult pilgrims, a gift shop selling religious and other artefacts made by local religious communities, and an amphitheatre for use by large tour groups.

Sabeel Liberation Theology Centre

PO Box 1248, Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem

A study centre, located outside the old city, directed by an Anglican theologian. The Centre focuses on the search for a just peace in the Holy Land, especially from the perspective of Palestinian Christians. Sabeel in Arabic means both 'the way' and also 'a spring'. In Britain, contact can be made through the 'Friends of Sabeel UK'.

Parts of this document have been drawn with permission from a publication of the United States Catholic Conference. Other details have been taken with permission from an pamphlet *Planning a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land? ... take an alternative route*, published by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in association with Christian Aid.

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