



HOLY LAND

Christians in the Holy Land Conference 2011

Intervention of HE Cardinal Tauran, President, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 19 July 2011

Christians in the Holy Land

By sending me to you Pope Benedict XVI manifests his deep interest in this conference and, having had the privilege of being a member of the Papal Suite during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in May 2009, I can remember the impact of his farewell speech at Tel Aviv airport when he pleaded for a lasting peace which can only rest on justice, genuine reconciliation and healing. But he did not hesitate also to state that one of the saddest sights of his pilgrimage was the Wall.

During these two days of exchange, I think that everybody here is convinced that if a wall can protect, it also divides and makes suspicion and ignorance grow.

So it is important that Christians in particular who are the disciples of the One who broke down “the barrier of hostility” to quote Saint Paul (Eph 2.14), should be in a condition to freely contribute to harmony and dialogue in the Israeli and Palestinian societies.

But unfortunately we have to recognize that the situation of Christians in the Holy Land, like in other Middle East countries, is marked by precariousness. We must remember that the political evolution of the last 50 years have made the presence and the leadership of Christians fragile: revolutions and wars have contributed to weaken the Christian communities and favoured the emigration of many families.

What we have to avoid is that the Holy Land becomes an archaeological and historical site to be visited like the Coliseum in Rome. For us Christians the Holy Land is the land of God’s revelation, the place where Jesus lived, died and was resurrected. We cannot even think that Bethlehem or the Holy Sepulcher should become museums with entrance tickets and guides who explain beautiful legends. For us the Holy Places, the shrines, are much more than stones. The Holy Places are living testimonies which have around them a population, families with their schools, their cultural patrimony, their languages, their folklore, their artisans, handicrafts as well as hospitals, etc.

We have been repeating for years that we are a Christian minority in the Holy Land and in the Arab world. I think it is enough to repeat such evidence. We are a minority, but we are a minority which matters. I think of our schools, universities and hospitals which welcome everybody, regardless of his or her religion.

Today the time has come to reflect on the place and the mission of Christian communities in the Holy Land and in the Middle East.

First of all, our Christian brothers and sisters of that part of the world have to realize that they have a certain peculiarity, I should say a certain dignity: they all belong to apostolic churches. Missionaries from Rome or Constantinople did not bring the Christian faith there. Those communities have been built on the faith of the apostles. They are apostolic communities in the deepest sense of the word. Their practice comes through the faith of the apostles; this is their identity.

Their liturgical patrimony is of an exceptional value. (Let us mention by the way that in many Oriental Churches the Eucharistic Prayer is said in the language spoken by Jesus.) It is important not to make of this rich heritage something we keep in a safe. There is a tendency to transform our Christian communities into cultural communities.

Secondly, Christians in the Holy Land and in the Middle East, are Arabs. They have been in that part of the world much before the Muslims. They are not asking asylum, they are rather at home. Our Christian brothers and sisters speak Arabic and for example, many Christians have contributed to the rebirth of Arabic literature at the end of the 19th century. I remember that when I was serving in the Nunciature in Beirut at the time of the civil war (1979—1983), despite the bombing of the Christian part of Beirut the Pauline fathers continued to print the Koran in the Arabic language.

Arab Christians are a gift to the societies because they bring cultural openness, a sense of the dignity of the human person and particularly of women; a conception of freedom which harmonizes rights and privileges and a conception of political society which can lead to democracy.

Christians have the vocation to be a bridge. Then the question is not how the Christians are going to survive in the Holy Land and the Middle East, but how they are ready to be witnesses to their faith. I think that many Muslims are worried about the future of Christians in that region, because they know that Christians can help them to understand modernity and how to reconcile diversity and unity.

The Christians have been in the Holy Land without interruption for centuries. They have enjoyed national and international rights. We cannot neglect the importance of a solution of the juridical status of the most significant part of Jerusalem, that is to say where the main Holy Places of the three monotheistic religions are (practically the city *intra muros*). You know that the Holy See is in favor of a special status, internationally guaranteed, in order to preserve the uniqueness and sacredness of that part of the city.

For Christians, Jerusalem has a special significance. First of all, it contains the most precious places where Jesus lived. Secondly, it is the city with an ongoing presence of a Christian community. So for the local Christians, like for the Jews and the Muslims, Jerusalem is not only a holy city, it is also their home city where they have a right to continue to live and to work. They must be granted and have secured the most fundamental rights: freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, freedom of movement, civic and historical rights, education, hospitals, the possession of their own institutions (seminaries, universities, monasteries, etc.). Of course, all this has to be recognized not only for Christians, but for all the inhabitants of the Holy Land.

The three monotheistic religions recognize Abraham as their father. In spite of the fact that his heritage gives room to different interpretations, we can find a common message: to follow Abraham means not to look back, but towards the future. Jews, Christians and Muslims must be heralds of hope. To follow Abraham means also to be attentive to the foreigner (remember the episode at the Tree of Mamre). To follow Abraham means never choosing to take the path that is a dead-end, but to be always a pilgrim.

Christians in the Holy Land do not pretend to be by themselves, to rule or to impose, but just to blossom where they have been planted by God, and to make their fellow citizens understand that every religion is an invitation to go along without idols, to be welcoming to newness, and to be always capable of solidarity.

Since Cain and Abel, exclusivism and the desire for security has always been in the heart of man. But history, like religion, teaches us that there is only one future: a shared future. What is important is not to stop but rather to continue our dialogue, our pilgrimage towards the truth, with the conviction that "it is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that they are difficult". You will have recognized a quotation from the Roman philosopher Seneca. So let us follow his advice: Let us dare.

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