

PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE HOLY LAND
(8-15 MAY 2009)

VISIT TO AIDA REFUGEE CAMP

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Bethlehem
Wednesday, 13 May 2009

Mr President,
Dear Friends,

My visit to the Aida Refugee Camp this afternoon gives me a welcome opportunity to express my solidarity with all the homeless Palestinians who long to be able to return to their birthplace, or to live permanently in a homeland of their own. Thank you, Mr President, for your kind greeting. And thank you also, Mrs Abu Zayd, and our other speakers. To all the officials of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency who care for the refugees, I express the appreciation felt by countless men and women all over the world for the work that is done here and in other camps throughout the region.

I extend a particular greeting to the pupils and teachers in the school. By your commitment to education you are expressing hope in the future. To all the young people here, I say: renew your efforts to prepare for the time when you will be responsible for the affairs of the Palestinian people in years to come. Parents have a most important role here, and to all the families present in this camp I say: be sure to support your children in their studies and to nurture their gifts, so that there will be no shortage of well-qualified personnel to occupy leadership positions in the Palestinian community in the future. I know that many of your families are divided – through imprisonment of family members, or restrictions on freedom of movement – and many of you have experienced bereavement in the course of the hostilities. My heart goes out to all who suffer in this way. Please be assured that all Palestinian refugees across the world, especially those who lost homes and loved ones during the recent conflict in Gaza, are constantly remembered in my prayers.

I wish to acknowledge the good work carried out by many Church agencies in caring for refugees here and in other parts of the Palestinian Territories. The Pontifical Mission for Palestine, founded some sixty years ago to coordinate Catholic humanitarian assistance for refugees, continues its much-needed work alongside other such organizations. In this camp, the presence of Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary calls to mind the charismatic figure of Saint Francis, that great apostle of peace and reconciliation. Indeed, I want to express my particular appreciation for the enormous contribution made by different members of the Franciscan family in caring for the people of these lands, making themselves “instruments of peace”, in the time-honored phrase attributed to the Saint of Assisi.

Instruments of peace. How much the people of this camp, these Territories, and this entire region long for peace! In these days, that longing takes on a particular poignancy as you recall the events of May 1948 and the years of conflict, as yet unresolved, that followed from those events. You are now living in precarious and difficult conditions, with limited opportunities for employment. It is understandable that you often feel frustrated. Your legitimate aspirations for permanent homes, for an independent Palestinian State, remain unfulfilled. Instead you find yourselves trapped, as so many in this region and throughout the world are trapped, in a spiral of violence, of attack and counter-attack, retaliation, and continual destruction. The whole world is longing for this spiral to be broken, for peace to put an end to the constant fighting.

Towering over us, as we gather here this afternoon, is a stark reminder of the stalemate that relations between Israelis and Palestinians seem to have reached – the wall. In a world where more and more borders are being opened up – to trade, to travel, to movement of peoples, to cultural exchanges – it is tragic to see walls still being erected. How we long to see the fruits of the much more difficult task of building peace! How earnestly we pray for an end to the hostilities that have caused this wall to be built!

On both sides of the wall, great courage is needed if fear and mistrust is to be overcome, if the urge to retaliate for loss or injury is to be resisted. It takes magnanimity to seek reconciliation after years of fighting. Yet history has shown that peace can only come when the parties to a conflict are willing to move beyond their grievances and work together towards common goals, each taking seriously the concerns and fears of the other, striving to build an atmosphere of trust. There has to be a willingness to take bold and imaginative initiatives towards reconciliation: if each insists on prior concessions from the other, the result can only be stalemate.

Humanitarian aid, of the kind provided in this camp, has an essential role to play, but the long-term solution to a conflict such as this can only be political. No one expects the Palestinian and Israeli peoples to arrive at it on their own. The support of the international community is vital, and hence I make a renewed appeal to all concerned to bring their influence to bear in favor of a just and lasting solution, respecting the legitimate demands of all parties and recognizing their right to live in peace and dignity, in accordance with international law. Yet at the same time, diplomatic efforts can only succeed if Palestinians and Israelis themselves are willing to break free from the cycle of aggression. I am reminded of those other beautiful words attributed to Saint Francis: “where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon ... where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy.”

To all of you I renew my plea for a profound commitment to cultivate peace and non-violence, following the example of Saint Francis and other great peacemakers. Peace has to begin in the home, in the family, in the heart. I continue to pray that all parties to the conflict in these lands will have the courage and imagination to pursue the challenging but indispensable path of reconciliation. May peace flourish once more in these lands! May God bless his people with peace!

