

Text of Pope Benedict XVI's Arrival Speech in Israel

11 May 2009

Mr President,
Mr Prime Minister,
Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your warm welcome to the State of Israel, a land which is held holy by millions of believers around the world. I am grateful to the President, Mr Shimon Peres, for his kind words, and I appreciate the opportunity that has been offered to me to come on pilgrimage to a land that is hallowed by the footsteps of patriarchs and prophets, a land that Christians hold in particular veneration as the setting for the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I take my place in a long line of Christian pilgrims to these shores, a line that stretches back to the earliest centuries of the Church's history and which, I am sure, will continue long into the future. I come, like so many others before me, to pray at the holy places, to pray especially for peace – peace here in the Holy Land, and peace throughout the world.

Mr President, the Holy See and the State of Israel have many shared values, above all a commitment to give religion its rightful place in the life of society. The just ordering of social relationships presupposes and requires a respect for the freedom and dignity of every human being, whom Christians, Muslims and Jews alike believe to be created by a loving God and destined for eternal life. When the religious dimension of the human person is denied or marginalized, the very foundation for a proper understanding of inalienable human rights is placed in jeopardy.

Tragically, the Jewish people have experienced the terrible consequences of ideologies that deny the fundamental dignity of every human person. It is right and fitting that, during my stay in Israel, I will have the opportunity to honor the memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah, and to pray that humanity will never again witness a crime of such magnitude. Sadly, anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head in many parts of the world. This is totally unacceptable. Every effort must be made to combat anti-Semitism wherever it is found, and to promote respect and esteem for the members of every people, tribe, language and nation across the globe.

During my stay in Jerusalem, I will have the pleasure of meeting many of this country's distinguished religious leaders. One thing that the three great monotheistic religions have in common is a special veneration for that holy city. It is my earnest hope that all pilgrims to the holy places will be able to access them freely and without restraint, to take part in religious ceremonies and to promote the worthy upkeep of places of worship on sacred sites. May the words of Isaiah's prophecy be fulfilled, that many nations shall flow to the mountain of the house of the Lord, that he may teach them his ways, that they may walk in his paths – paths of peace and justice, paths that lead to reconciliation and harmony (cf. Is 2:2-5).

Even though the name Jerusalem means “city of peace”, it is all too evident that, for decades, peace has tragically eluded the inhabitants of this holy land. The eyes of the world are upon the peoples of this region as they struggle to achieve a just and lasting solution to conflicts that have caused so much suffering. The hopes of countless men, women and children for a more secure and stable future depend on the outcome of negotiations for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In union with people of good will everywhere, I plead with all those responsible to explore every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties, so that both peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own, within secure and internationally recognized borders. In this regard, I hope and pray that a climate of greater trust can soon be created that will enable the parties to make real progress along the road to peace and stability.

To the Catholic bishops and faithful here present, I offer a special word of greeting. In this land, where Peter received his commission to feed the Lord’s sheep, I come as Peter’s successor to minister among you. It will be my special joy to join you for the concluding celebrations of the Year of the Family, due to take place in Nazareth, home of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. As I said in my Message for the World Day of Peace last year, the family is the “first and indispensable teacher of peace” (No. 3), and hence it has a vital role to play in healing divisions in human society at every level. To the Christian communities in the Holy Land, I say: by your faithful witness to him who preached forgiveness and reconciliation, by your commitment to uphold the sacredness of every human life, you can make a particular contribution to ending the hostilities that for so long have afflicted this land. I pray that your continuing presence in Israel and the Palestinian Territories will bear much fruit in promoting peace and mutual respect among all the peoples who live in the lands of the Bible.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, once again I thank you for your welcome and I assure you of my sentiments of good will. May God give his people strength! May God bless his people with peace!