

Bridges, Not Walls
Reflections of the Bishops' Pilgrimage for Peace in the Holy Land
January 18 - 27, 2018

We came as Pilgrims of Peace to this Land that is Holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. We encountered many walls and some bridges, as we sought out those on the peripheries. As Pope Francis repeatedly reminds us, we believe peace with justice for the two peoples and three faiths of this Land can only come through building “bridges, not walls.”

In Sderot, the city that has suffered the most from rocket attacks by Hamas, we encountered the real fears of Israelis. They have grieved the loss of lives, and their children are regularly required to practice air raid drills. At the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum, we were deeply moved as we were once again reminded of the horrors that gave impetus to the establishment of a secure homeland for the Jewish people.

In Gaza and Jiffna, we celebrated the Sunday Eucharist with small, vibrant Christian communities. In Gaza, Christians live alongside their Muslim neighbors, as if in a large prison. The Israeli wall and blockade stifles economic opportunity and the aspirations of youth. Christians are emigrating at an alarming rate. Those few who secure Israeli permits to exit Gaza often never return.

In Jerusalem, the uncertain status of the Holy Places and of the City itself has increased tensions. The Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem suffer with poor infrastructure and schools, and residency policies that separate families and cause others to lose their right to live there. In Nazareth, we learned about discrimination that Arab Israelis face in employment, housing and daily life.

In the West Bank, we encountered stark reminders of the Israeli occupation—check-points that inhibit movement, confiscations of Palestinian lands, expansion of Israeli settlements, and a security barrier whose route cuts deep into the West Bank, which together with Israeli-only bypass roads, strangles natural urban growth and divides the Palestinian Territories into non-contiguous cantons. In Hebron, a large Palestinian city, over 20 checkpoints and road closures, designed to protect internationally illegal settlements in the old city center, make life terribly burdensome for the native residents and has devastated their economy.

We call upon the leaders of our nation and the international community to address the grave injustices being perpetrated in Susya and the Cremisan Valley. In Susya, a Bedouin Muslim community faces unjust appropriations of lands and the imminent destruction of their village by the Israeli military. In the Cremisan valley, scores of Christian Palestinian families face the loss of their agricultural lands, and a Salesian monastery, convent, and school face challenges.

We urge the U.S. government not to cut badly needed humanitarian and development assistance. We met with families in Gaza and the West Bank who depend on aid for basic necessities, health care and education.

For many, the situation looks hopeless. In fact, we are particularly concerned about the dramatic decline of the Christian presence throughout the Holy Land.

But hope lives on. Israeli and Palestinian lawyers work for human rights. In the Oasis of Peace, Jewish, Christian and Muslim families model cooperation and coexistence. The Church sponsors

schools where persons of different religions study together, health ministries that serve the most vulnerable, and relief and development agencies. We are particularly proud of the work of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre in supporting the local Church, of Catholic Relief Services in Gaza and the West Bank, and of Bethlehem University, a Catholic institution of the Christian Brothers where young Christians and Muslims study together, building leadership for Palestine.

This pilgrimage reminded us of our Apostolic Vocation to serve all of humanity. More than once we were reminded not to be pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian, but to be pro-peace and pro-justice. The occupation and injustices must end. The violence and discrimination must end. Justice and human dignity demand that the two peoples and the three faiths share this Land.

Throughout the Pilgrimage, we felt the presence of our Lord as we prayed and celebrated daily Eucharist in the place of his birth, the town of his childhood, the Mount of Beatitudes, the garden of his agony, and the city of Jerusalem where he suffered, died and rose again. His way of forgiveness and reconciliation leads us to embrace encounter and dialogue as paths to peace. Walls, physical and ideological, make these encounters less possible, and for that reason we seek to build “bridges, not walls.”

We urge Catholics to pray for the peoples of the Holy Land, to come on Pilgrimage to both the Holy Sites and the local Christian community, and to urge our nation’s leaders to support policies that promote justice and peace.

Most Rev. Oscar Cantú, Bishop of Las Cruces, Former Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace

Most Rev. Nelson Jesus Perez, Bishop of Cleveland, Chairman, Sub-Committee on Hispanic Affairs

Most Rev. José Arturo Cepeda, Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit

Most Rev. Octavio Cisneros, Auxiliary Bishop of Brooklyn

Most Rev. Eusebio Elizondo, MSpS, Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle

Most Rev. Felipe de Jesús Estévez, Bishop of St. Augustine

Most Rev. Armando Xavier Ochoa, Bishop of Fresno

Most Rev. Rutilio del Riego, Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of San Bernardino

Most Rev. Alberto Rojas, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago

Most Rev. Plácido Rodríguez, Bishop Emeritus of Lubbock