



On the occasion of the visit of H.H Pope Francis to the State of Palestine - May 25 - 26 2014

The Holy See and Palestine

*A Longstanding Relationship Based On The
Shared Values Of Love, Peace And Justice For All*



The Holy See and Palestine have a longstanding relationship based on the shared values of love, peace and justice for all of God's children. As early as 1947, the Holy See played an important role in lobbying for the protection of Christian sites in Palestine, ahead of a prospective UN partition plan. When the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) happened in 1948, whereby two thirds of the Palestinian population was exiled at the hands of Zionist militias, the Catholic Church lost several communities equating to thousands of Palestinian Christians as a result of the Nakba. A number of churches, cemeteries and religious shrines were also destroyed. Responding to the situation, the Vatican provided humanitarian support to Palestinian refugees through the Catholic Church in Palestine and neighboring countries. This understanding of the Palestinian situation led to the establishment of Pontifical Mission and later CARITAS – Jerusalem (after the 1967 war), both Rome-based organizations which continue to support the people of Palestine and its institutions to this day. This short pamphlet gives an overview of the history and key moments in relations between these two holy places.

Timeline: 1960s-90s

1964 Pope Paul VI visits Palestine

One of the most remarkable moments in the history of relations between Palestine and the Holy See was the Papal Visit made by Pope Paul VI to Palestine in 1964, where he met with the local church and saw the reality of the Palestinian people on the ground. This encouraged His Holiness to support the creation of important institutions, including Bethlehem University. The University celebrated its 40th anniversary last October and has been responsible for the graduation of over 14,000 young Palestinians, women and men.

1970S Catholic figures all over the world respond to calls to support the Palestinian people

During the seventies many figures of the Catholic Church dedicated their time and efforts towards achieving justice and peace in the Holy Land. The creation of the Palestinian chapter of the "Justice and Peace," a commission functioning under the auspices of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, was one of the important milestones in gaining international solidarity for the plight of the people of Palestine. The commission, which still exists under the guidance of Patriarch Emeritus Michael Sabbah, is defined as a Catholic resource, liaison and animation center to further the social mission of the Church. While in exile, the late Fr. Ibrahim Ayyad, a close confidante and personal envoy of President Yasser Arafat, participated in important lobbying and negotiation efforts in order to advance the rights of the Palestinian people. Hundreds of priests from all over the world responded to the calls made by Palestinian Christian figures.

1974 Pope Paul VI calls for the recognition of the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people

1974 President Arafat celebrates Bishop Capucci in his famous UN speech

During his famous speech to the UN in October 1974, President Arafat had only words of admiration for one of the most prominent symbols of the Palestinian struggle for independence and peace- Bishop Hilarion Cappuci, the Bishop of the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church in Palestine. Capucci was imprisoned by Israeli authorities. He was released only a few years later after the Holy See intervened, being deported to Italy.

"And before those same [Israeli Occupation] courts there stands today a brave prince of the church, Bishop Capucci. Lifting his fingers to form the same victory sign used by our freedom-fighters, he said: "What I have done, I have done that all men may live on this land of peace in peace." This princely priest...to him we send our salutations and greetings."

President Arafat



1976

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Cazzaroli visits Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in Lebanon, marking first official meeting between the Holy See and the PLO

1977 & 1978

Statements of Pope Paul VI

Pope Paul VI made several statements to the College of Cardinals, noting that the Christian shrines in the Holy Land would mean nothing if there were no Palestinian Christian population. He pointed out that the Christians in Palestine have been taking care of their holy sites for 2000 years and urged the Cardinals to help maintain the Palestinian Christian presence in order to maintain the “sacredness of Jerusalem.”

1980 Pope John Paul II supports Palestinians rights

In 1980, Mr. Afif Safieh was assigned as a special envoy to the Holy See with a letter to a Pope whom Palestinians had not yet had the privilege to meet. The special envoy also took a message which he delivered through Cardinal Silvestrini, the Vatican Secretary of State for Relations with States: That the leader of the Palestinian people committed himself to supporting all UN resolutions. Following this meeting, Pope John Paul II issued a strong statement supporting Palestinian rights:

“a sad condition was created for the Palestinian people, who were in conspicuous part excluded from their homeland”

On Jerusalem, the Pontiff stated what would become the official Vatican policy:

“Jerusalem today is the object of a dispute that seems to be without solution. Tomorrow, tomorrow God willing, it can become the crossroads of conciliation and peace.”



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1987

Pope John Paul II appoints Michel Sabbah as the Latin (Roman Catholic) Patriarch of Jerusalem

This significant appointment, which came during the First Intifada (1987–1993) marked the first time the Latin Patriarchate was to be led by a Palestinian, something that was seen as an act of support to the Palestinian Christian presence and their role in the church. Along with other heads of churches, Patriarch Sabbah played an important role in lifting the Israeli-imposed siege, as well as ending deliberate violence against civilians in the biblical town of Beit Sahour. He also opposed Israeli settlement activity, particularly when 150 armed settlers occupied Saint John’s hospice, across from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in occupied East Jerusalem. As a protest to this act, the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Nativity Church in Bethlehem and the Annunciation Church in Nazareth all closed their doors for one day. This protest was coordinated by the 13 churches in Palestine and led by the Greek Orthodox, Latin and Armenian patriarchates.

The Holy See and the Middle East Peace Process

The Holy See has been one of the strongest advocates of the Middle East Peace Process. Indeed, it was only after the PLO officially recognized Israel that the Holy See established diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. Pope John Paul insisted on aligning the Holy See position with international law. He said:

“...it is time to return to the principles of international legality, the banning of the acquisition of territory by force, the right of peoples to self-determination, respect for the United Nations Organizations, and the Geneva Conventions, to quote only the most important.”

A year after the Oslo Agreement was signed, in 1994, the Pope appointed Monsignor Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo as the Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine.

1994

Pope John Paul II appoints Monsignor Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo as the Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine.

Signing the Basic Agreement between the Holy See and Palestine

2000

Diplomatic activity between the PLO and the Holy See continued to increase, including the historic signature of a “Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the Palestine Liberation Organization” in February 2000, after extensive efforts directed by President Yasser Arafat and conducted by the late Dr. Emile Jarjoui. The agreement reiterated that all Palestinians are equal before the law, regardless of their religion, and that it respected the historic status of the Catholic Church in Palestine, including the Status Quo of Holy Sites where it applies. Together, the PLO and the Holy See established a permanent Bilateral Working Commission and called for a:

“peaceful solution of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, which would realize the inalienable national legitimate rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people (...) in order to ensure peace and security for all peoples of the region on the basis of international law, relevant United Nations and its Security Council resolutions, justice and equity.”

2000

Pope John Paul II honors Palestine with a visit

A month later, Palestine was honored by a Papal Visit. Pope John Paul II was welcomed in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City including Vatican and Palestinian flags held high by Palestinian leaders in Jerusalem, such as the late Faisal Husseini and Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. In Bethlehem, His Holiness visited the Nativity Church and Dheisheh Refugee Camp, delivering a historic speech:



“ How can I fail to pray that the divine gift of peace will become more and more a reality for all who live in this land, uniquely marked by God's intentions? Peace for the Palestinian people! Peace for all peoples of the region! No one can ignore how much the Palestinian people have had to suffer in recent decades. Your torment is before the eyes of the world, and it has gone on too long (...) The Holy See has always recognized that the Palestinian people have the natural right to a homeland, and the right to be able to live in peace and tranquility with the other peoples of this area. In the international forum, my predecessors and I have repeatedly claimed that there would be no end to the sad conflict in the Holy Land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declarations ”



Pope John Paul II was briefed by President Arafat on all developments during the important events of 2000. During the Camp David Summit in July, open channels of communication were maintained with the Holy See, including full briefings on issues of concern to the Vatican, such as the Palestinian position on the issue of Jerusalem. After the talks failed, the Holy See continued to advocate for a negotiated solution that would fulfill the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The then Secretary for Relations with States, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, consistently emphasized international law, UN resolutions and the rights of all religions to freedom of worship.

2002

Cooperation with the Holy See during Israeli siege of Nativity Church and construction of Annexation Wall

In 2002, the government of Palestine coordinated fully with the Holy See during the Israeli siege on the Nativity Church in Bethlehem. President Arafat committed himself to the protection of the Church from Israeli attack and pushed for international intervention in order to end the siege. The Holy See was briefed by Palestinian officials during all talks, including daily contact between the Palestinian government, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Custodia of Terra Sancta.

When Israel decided to build the annexation wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, the Holy See strongly condemned the move. Pope John Paul II said

“ the construction of the wall between the Israeli people and the Palestinian people is seen by many as a new obstacle on the road leading to peaceful cohabitation (...) In fact, the Holy Land does not need walls but bridges ”



President Mahmoud Abbas appoints a new Ambassador to the Holy See

2007

In 2005 the newly and democratically elected President Mahmoud Abbas appointed a new government. He appointed Mr. Shawqi Armali as the new Palestinian Ambassador to the Holy See, an experienced diplomat based in Brussels. Around the same period of time there were also changes in the Vatican, with the departure of Pope John Paul II and the beginning of Pope Benedict XVI's papacy. Two Apostolic Delegates were appointed to Palestine, Msg. Pietro Sambri (1998 – 2005) and Msg. Antonio Franco (2005 – 2012).

2009

Pope Benedict XVI visits Palestine after vicious Israeli assault on Gaza

Pope Benedict visited Palestine in May 2009, just a few months after the vicious Israeli assault on Gaza. The Pope began his homily at the Nativity Square by saying

“ In a special way my heart goes out to the pilgrims from war-torn Gaza: I ask you to bring back to your families and your communities my warm embrace, and my sorrow for the loss, the hardship and the suffering you have had to endure. Please be assured of my solidarity with you in the immense work of rebuilding which now lies ahead, and my prayers that the embargo will soon be lifted. ”



2009-2013

The Holy Land Churches work towards justice

In Bethlehem, the Pope repeated the official position of the Holy See:

“ Mr President (H.E Mahmoud Abbas), the Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally recognized borders. In the words of the late Pope John Paul II, there can be “no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness. ”

Palestinian religious communities have contributed enormously to the national liberation cause. Examples include the launching of the Kairos Document, in which Palestinian Christians provide the universal Christian message of “Love and Peace” to end the Israeli occupation, and the weekly mass at the Cremisan Valley by the Roman Catholic Community in Beit Jala, against the construction of the Israeli annexation wall. This mass has attracted international attention, including full and public support by councils of bishops in Europe and North America. Meanwhile, hundreds of church-run schools and other institutions show that Christianity is a significant part of the Palestinian social fabric in the wider struggle to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

2013 The Vatican welcomes a new Pope and a new Palestinian Ambassador

In 2013 Pope Benedict XVI appointed a Msg. Giuseppe Lazzarotto as the new Apostolic Delegate to Palestine, an experienced Vatican diplomat with extensive knowledge of the region and the Arabic language. During the same year Pope Benedict XVI left his position and was replaced by Pope Francis.

In 2013 Palestinian Ambassador Armali sadly passed away. President Abbas appointed Mr. Issa Kassissieh as the new Palestinian ambassador to the Holy See, who presented his credential to His Holiness Pope Francis in October 2013.



2014 Palestine strengthens further its relations with the Holy See.

Under the auspices of H.E. President Abbas, negotiations are underway for a new agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine, in the same spirit that has guided the relations between the two parties for decades: Full respect for international law, respect for pluralism, equality, and the achievement of a just and lasting peace in Palestine, the Holy Land. This has been further affirmed by the State of Palestine's full accession to several Human Rights treaties in April 2014, including The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.



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