

Striving for Peace in the Holy Land

Quotes from Church Leaders

- “We urge the Bush administration to return to the traditional U.S. role of “honest broker” by working with the international community to press Palestinians and Israelis to find peaceful means to settle their differences in accord with international law and to build together a culture of peace that respects the rights of all.” Bishop John Ricard, S.S.J., **USCCB, April 2004**
- “We will work for a just peace in this Land and seek to engage our local Churches and countries in this task. The entire world has a stake in justice and peace here. At this hopeful moment our prayers are with all who share this Land: Israelis and Palestinians, Christians, Jews and Muslims, that we will very soon see decisive action and courageous steps to bring an end to violence and injustice and accomplish peace and reconciliation in the Land we all call Holy.” Most Reverend William Skylstad, **President-USCCB, January 2005**
- “We are witnessing today, in our daily life of conflict and of occupation in our Holy Land, a renewed effort toward justice and reason. We are also witnessing a renewed involvement of the international community. We thank God for this. We ask him to strengthen the leaders in their new visions.” Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, **Michel Sabbah, April 2005**

Introduction

As Israelis and Palestinians struggle to end years of conflict, Pope John Paul II and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops continue to call for the United States to be unwavering in its work to help bring a just peace to the region. Peace has always been a challenging goal for this



region and it continues to be so. Public opinion polls show that most Palestinians and Israelis, and most Americans support negotiations for a two-state solution. Many believe Israel has the right to exist in peace and security alongside an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state.

In a 2004 statement, USCCB expressed concerns over the recent shift in US policy towards the conflict as outlined by President Bush during Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s recent visit to Washington D.C. In particular, the Bishops noted that U.S. acceptance of Israeli created “facts on the grounds” established in defiance of long-standing policy regarding the existence of Israeli settlements and the Palestinian refugees right of return is a significant departure from past American policy and will threaten the administration’s ability to act as an honest broker in any negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

Since renewed political unrest erupted in September of 2000, over 3,900 people, including at least 3,000 Palestinians and 900 Israelis, have lost their lives in the spiral of violence that has marked the most recent conflict.

In Israel, the loss of hundreds of innocent lives from terrorist attacks on city buses and in shopping areas, crowded streets and universities has understandably created a strong demand for lasting security.

In the Palestinian territories, Israeli military actions, curfews and closures imposed by the Israeli government have resulted not only in an escalating loss of life, but in wide-scale joblessness, malnutrition and displacement – conditions that affect all Palestinians and exacerbate the violence. As of late 2003, the World Bank estimates that between 60 to 70 percent of the population of the West Bank and Gaza live on less than \$2 per day, and unemployment levels have soared to 60 percent, nearly three times the pre-intifada levels.

In addition to the above restrictions on freedom of movement, a physical barrier between Israel and the West Bank is currently being constructed which will further impede the ability of Palestinians to conduct their daily lives. Christian leaders in the Holy Land are especially concerned about the wall, which they have called a “grave obstacle to peace” and that is already having a devastating humanitarian impact on the Palestinian population. The wall, of which 150 kilometers (93 miles) of the total 640 kilometers (397 miles) has already been constructed, will separate Palestinians from their families, agricultural land, irrigation networks, schools, healthcare and livelihoods, making everyday life difficult. In many areas, the route of the wall cuts deeply into the West Bank, and may affect as many as an estimated forty percent of

the Palestinian population and approximately forty-seven percent of the land in the West Bank, depending on what the final path of the wall will be.

CRS programs in the region

CRS has been working in the Holy Land for more than 60 years and has long partnered with community organizations of various faiths to address immediate human suffering, support human development, and foster peace and reconciliation.

Since 1961, CRS has focused its efforts in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which contain some of the region's most vulnerable people, many of whom have been refugees for approximately 60 years. In these areas, CRS has helped partners foster long-term rural development by building roads, health centers and schools. It has created programs to help parents take care of disabled children and has supported efforts to help families become financially stable.

CRS continues to operate development programs that foster economic and social stability. Despite the restrictions of curfews and military closures, CRS' work has continued unabated due to the dedication and steadfast commitment of staff and partners.

Currently CRS programming focuses on the 3.6 million Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza. The escalation of violence has required CRS to significantly increase emergency assistance programs that respond to the humanitarian crisis in ways that strengthen relationships of solidarity and inter-faith cooperation.

The trauma of on-going violence, closure, and curfews, limited food and income, as well as arrests and house demolitions takes a particular toll on Palestinian children. Through a grant from the Gates Foundation, CRS is working with two local partners to establish ten volunteer-run community youth centers in the West Bank towns of Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron. Each center will provide activities for youths aged 6 to 18 aimed at reducing psychological stress and alleviating their feelings of isolation.

At a time when per capita incomes in the region are 45 percent lower than they were in 1999, several CRS programs provide residents short and long-term employment opportunities.

In the West Bank, for example, CRS programming seeks to strengthen communities by creating jobs in community-based services, education, health, and public infrastructure. In Gaza, CRS has created new jobs building agricultural roads, agricultural water catchments, community centers and kindergartens, as well as in providing some targeted emergency assistance to needy families.

We pray that God will hasten the day when both peoples, in the words of the Psalmist, may call Zion mother, "for all shall be her children."
Bishop John H. Ricard, S.S.J.

How Catholics in the U.S. Can respond

Visit CRS' website to download resources other resources for prayer and reflection:

http://www.catholicrelief.org/get_involved/advocacy/grass_roots/take_action.cfm

Visit USCCB's website to read about the Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land and to download campaign documents:

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/holylandpeace.htm>

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Planting Seeds of Hope

My name is Malak Al Hammouri. My husband and I live with our three daughters in Jerusalem.

Some time ago my husband was arrested and placed in administrative detention.

My three children each handled the news about their father's detention in different ways. Majd, 15, found comfort with her schoolmates and teachers. Dina, 9, released her tension by writing letters to her incarcerated father and responded to e-mail messages from friends and strangers overseas who expressed their support to the family. Rowd, 5, became more needy and demonstrated aggressive behavior towards her pre-school classmates.

My husband's employer, the YMCA, spearheaded a campaign for his release and the campaign snowballed and became a global drive joined by Amnesty International among other organizations.

One of Dina's letters to her father was included in the campaign's appeal to which the responses were both plentiful and uplifting. The outpouring of genuine concern opened my girls' eyes to the fact that the world harbors people willing to listen and offer friendship.

My husband was released early and that came as a surprise.

The experience with my girls only reinforced my belief in the work that I was hired to do for the *Connecting and Protecting Children in Palestine* program.

Implemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the project established 10 youth computer lab centers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip to help children like my daughter Dina cope with the adverse effects of the conflict on their psychosocial well-being.

Reunited again as a family, things are once more as they should be. I am immensely thankful to all those who responded to Dina's letter as they were able to plant a seed of hope in her heart and in each of our family's members.

I cannot think of similar incidences without wondering about its long-term impact on children on both sides who live such horrors and are likely to carry their fear, frustration and anger into the next generation.

Malak Al Hammouri is a Catholic Relief Services employee at its Jerusalem/West Bank/Gaza office.