

Easter Message from the Holy Land

From Bishop Munib Younan Easter Message from the Holy Land

Salaam and Grace in the name of our Crucified and Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

As I write this message of Easter, I really do not know where to start, lest somebody will ask me: What is the truth?

It seems that the truth lies beyond the thoughts of our hearts and beyond the mass media. When Jesus was indicted on Maundy Thursday, the truth lay in that he was the Messiah, the Lamb of God, who came to carry the sin of the world.

Here many incidents take place everyday. It is in every minute that things change. The situation is very unpredictable. The other day, I visited Hebron with Peter Prove (Lutheran World Federation), Kent Johnson (ELCA), and Gustaf Odquist, where we were generously hosted by one of the Moslem Sheiks, who is a close friend of mine. We were shocked to see the real picture of the truth. An Israeli settler woman was throwing stones on Palestinian shopkeepers while the army was leniently asking her not to do so. At the same time, other soldiers nearby were shooting live ammunition on Palestinian youth. I ask: What is the truth? Is this justice? Where is at least the Christian conscience?

The situation continues to deteriorate day by day. The Israeli siege on the Palestinian territories is tightening. You need only to pass in the morning near my house in Tantur and watch the police and soldiers running after Palestinian laborers, who

search for their daily bread, and witness the realities behind the UN statistics stating that the present unemployment rate in the Palestinian areas is now around 38% of the working force.

We hear a language of war that vacillates between self-restraint to no restraint at all, but for us Palestinians, in Bethlehem, Gaza, Ramallah, or Beit Sahour, the use of the language does not change the realities of what we are experiencing. We see massive damage being done to buildings, hotels, and banks, and many homes demolished. All this destruction is creating more hatred, more fear, more revenge, more traumas and more death. If you ask yourself, why should all this be? I have no answer, except the details of the stories of the Holy week of suffering. Some thought, that they could kill the truth by coercive power. Others thought, that the imposition of a distorted public opinion could change the absolute truth. Some thought by walking with the Truth, whatever the costs may be, you would be liberated by the Truth.

This is our Palestinian story; only truth and justice will liberate both Palestinians and Israelis to see the real truth. The truth may oblige us to carry the cross and be crucified on Golgotha, but the crucifixion and humiliation and the power of live ammunition can never kill the truth of justice or reconciliation that gets its glory in the Risen Lord.

It is true that the Palestinian Church is now a church that carries the cross. Or better, we are the church of real martyrria. For this reason, our witness is a witness for love, for the just peace, for the non-violent struggle for the truth, and for equitable just co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis. The Church of the martyrria is the Church that seriously carries the cross whatever the price might be, because it is the follower of its crucified Lord and master.

As I angrily watched the television, after having been humiliated at Ben Gurion airport for three consecutive times in a month (even to the extent that my humanity was being denied by an Israeli security girl), I saw the Israeli army demolishing a Palestinian home in Jerusalem. I was then very impressed to learn that one of our dialogue partners, Rabbi Arik Ashermann, of Rabbis for Human Rights, slept in front of the Israeli machines to stop them from demolishing the house. He was then handcuffed and detained by the police. I spoke with him the next day congratulating him for his brave action. I mention this because we know that there are many Israelis of good will, who know that the future does not lie in hatred and suppressing the Palestinians but in defending equal human, civil, religious and political rights for all.

It is sad to note that the voices of these Israelis are hardly heard at all in the present time of crisis. Now is the time for the destructive voices of the extremists of both sides. Their language of violence and death is what people hear, and hatred and fear is on the increase. Let me mention one prominent example of this. Yesterday we heard Rabbi Obadia Yosef, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi in Israel, say in a sermon broadcast via satellite to tens of thousands of households: Those evil Arabs don't pity them. They should be destroyed with missiles, with a free hand. Surely, such statements in favor of genocide are an indication of the depth of the crisis in which we live.

For this reason, from our Golgotha, we urge all people of good will, not only to write statements, but also to activate their governments and leaders to implement United Nations Resolutions 242, 338, and 194. There is no longer time for anyone to remain only a spectator. All voices must be raised, and all appropriate action taken to have these resolutions implemented, and thereby secure the welfare of all people in the Holy Land. The movement towards an Apartheid state must be stopped.

In this time of crisis, we very much appreciate all signs of support and concern that we receive from our partners and friends around the world. We are grateful for receiving delegations who come to express their solidarity with us. We would be pleased to welcome more such visitors. It is also a joy for us to receive short-time voluntary workers, whose presence among us is a sign of solidarity and support. At present, we are pleased to have The Rev. Kent Johnson and Ms. Stephanie Saenger from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America here with us.

It is of great importance for us to know that our partner churches, as well as individual Christians in many places, are keeping us in their constant prayers. We are encouraged by the fact that Prayer Vigil Services for just and lasting peace in the Middle East are being held daily in congregations and churches in U.S.A., Sweden, Norway, Germany, and Congo. Please continue to pray for us, for Palestinians and Israelis, and for just peace and reconciliation in the land of Resurrection. From the Calvary, we ask you, please do not cease praying for us.

May the Risen Lord renew our Hope, and fill your Easter with Life and Joy. Christ is Risen Truly He is Risen!

Your brother in Christ,
Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, April 6, 2001—The Patriarchs and Bishops of the historic churches in this Holy City have addressed a message of hope to the members of their congregations scattered across Israel and Palestine.

In what is becoming increasingly common in days that they acknowledge are filled with “deep despair,” these church leaders

speak with a single voice to their own faithful and to Christians around the world.

The message of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders is both deeply spiritual and urgently contemporary. The full text follows:

***Common Easter Message
by Their Beatitudes the Patriarchs
and Their Excellencies the Heads of the Churches
of Jerusalem***

Christ is risen (Luke 24:1-52).

Jesus, Lord and Saviour, has risen today, just as He had foretold His apostles. They will put Him to death, and on the third day He will rise again (Matthew 17:23).

Indeed, after the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Churches of Jerusalem witness with one voice and one heart to the glory of His Resurrection as they rejoice in the hope and strength that comes from that empty tomb in the heart of our Holy City.

Before bearing the cross Himself, Jesus had called upon His disciples to carry the cross and follow Him. He had asked them to walk the narrow path that leads toward salvation. This double vision of the cross and the Resurrection applies to the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Our suffering and fear in the past few months has increased in view of the uncertainty of the political situation. We reassure each and every one of our sons and daughters that we share the pain of every family that is deprived of hope as they go through their daily lives without jobs and income or are exposed physically and psychologically to the painful measures

that are imposed upon them.

Although the closures that are sealing most of the Palestinian territories bring days of deep despair, we ought to remain committed to hope. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live (Deuteronomy 30:19).

In this cycle of struggle and suffering, we detect also the way of the cross that will ultimately lead toward the glory of the Resurrection. Thus celebrating Easter means the restoration of our hope that victory of life over death also will be witnessed in the troubled land of ours.

This will only happen when violence and discrimination give way for a real peace, between the two peoples and the three religions of this small land where God chose to reveal His divine will. Such a peace can only be secured through mutual reconciliation based on the respect for the dignity and value God has given to all human beings.

In no way can this peace be imposed by sheer force: it is nurtured by an honest application of justice and mercy in line with internationally accepted legitimate resolutions for the benefit of the weaker part. Therefore, all of us, who claim faith in the Living God who has overcome death and sin, are called today to witness and work with steadfast determination and persistent commitment. The words of the prophet Isaiah come fittingly to mind: "See the former things have come to pass and new things I now declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them (Isaiah 42:9).

God speaks to us of a time in which the relationship of creation with the Creator is restored, justice is the benchmark of every nation, and the light of redemption shines in the

deepest corners of despair.

As all the Churches of Jerusalem celebrate the paschal festivities together this first year of the new millenium, they also affirm that the experience of Easter is one of liberation. It is a triumph of life over death, of peace over violence. Looking at the One God who manifested His power over servitude and death, we address all secular and political authorities to welcome into their hearts the good will and good faith that builds new generations with renewed hope and sustained confidence.

Today, we ask our faithful in the Holy Land as well as all believers world-wide to share with us in the transformation of hearts and minds so that the true joy that comes with the Risen Lord can also infuse their own lives.

We pray for an end to the unjustifiable deaths that plague our societies. We pray for the immediate end of all collective punishments, especially for the lifting of the closures of Palestinians towns and villages. We pray for the good will of Palestinians and Israelis, of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike in actively working for justice and peace. We pray for equality so that one no longer sees the neighbour as an enemy but rather as a brother or sister with whom to build a new society.

Ours is a message of hope and compassion, of reconciliation and joy. To all, we affirm that Easter is the time to become one voice and one heart before the Lord so that we may come to know Him and the power of the Resurrection (Philippians 3:10) in a genuine, just and comprehensive peace that no longer disparages one God-given life over another.

Our Christian message remains constant year in year out. Life conquers death and love defeats hatred. Hope tramples

desolation, joy overcomes despair and peace ends violence. So let us all proclaim together: Where, o death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?.. But thanks to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1Corinthians 15:55.57). The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed.

Signed by the the Heads of the thirteen traditional Churches in Jerusalem:

- *Archimandrite Cornelius:
Locum Tenens, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate*
- *Patriarch Michel Sabbah:
Latin Patriarchate.*
- *Patriarch Torkom II:
Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate.*
- *Ignatius VIII Pierre Abdul-Ahad:
Syrian Catholic Patriarch.*
- *Father Giovanni Battistelli:
Custody of the Holy Land.*
- *Anba Abraham:
Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate.*
- *Swerios Malki Mourad:
Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate.*
- *Abba Gabriel:
Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate.*
- *Riah Abu Al-Assal:
Episcopal Church of Jerusalem & the Middle East.*
- *Mounib Younan:
Lutheran Evangelical Church.*
- *Maximus Sallum:
Greek Catholic (Melkite) Patriarchal Exarchate.*
- *Paul Nabil Sayyah:
Maronite Patriarchal Exarchate.*
- *Andr Dikran Bedoghlyan:
Armenian Catholic Patriarchal Exarcate.*

April 12, 2001

A Cry to the World for the Future of Our Children

Salaam and grace from a troubled Jerusalem.

As a Palestinian mother of three children, I am very worried about the future of our children in this region. I am the director of the Helen Keller School for visually impaired, blind and handicapped children in Jerusalem. When I watch television and follow the mass media and hear that children are killed and mercilessly not spared the shooting and the shelling, I fear for the future of my country.

Ten days ago, my 17 year old son was returning from Talitha Kumi Lutheran School, in Beit Jala near Bethlehem, when the shelling started. When he arrived at home, I had to thank God that he was all right. As the school busses transport the blind and the visually impaired children from Ramallah, Hebron, and Nablus, so that they can have a decent education, I am fearful for their safety. My worry is very intense because I cannot assure their safety to our school. I am terrified that my students from 3 to 18 years old could be shot or harmed.

As a mother, I call upon all mothers in the world to intervene and stop the spiral of violence in the Middle East. We do not want the children of Palestine or Israel killed or to grow up in hatred, revenge and fear. When I see that a child is killed, I see my own children.

I appeal to the good willed politicians in the U.S.A., Europe, and other parts of the world, to living conscience religious leaders, and to all good willed peace movements, not merely to issue statements but to do the utmost possible to bring comprehensive just peace to our country.

We must stop the massacre in this country.

Please allow the children of the Holy Land to live as our countryman, Jesus taught us. Please allow us to live our life abundantly. Allow us to enjoy our humanness and humanity with all its rights preserved.

I beseech you to see to it that the international legitimacy is implemented so that Israelis and Palestinians may live in just peace. We must live as equals, with justice and in peace with each other in our own States.

I plea to all the mothers in the world, to help us realize this dream. As a believer in the Living God, the Crucified and Risen Lord, I call upon all the Jewish, Christian and Muslim mothers to give our children a chance for comprehensive lasting just peace and reconciliation as with their peers in the world.

Yours sincerely,

Suad Younan
Principle
Helen Keller School for the Blind
Jerusalem

[Ed comment: I think this is the Bishop's wife. But I'm not sure.]

April 14 2001
Subject: Easter Greetings from Bethlehem

Dear Friends

A Blessed Easter for You and Your Loved Ones
It has been some time since we have written you. We decided to wait a while hoping that the next time we wrote you we will have

something positive to tell. Unfortunately, no positive change in the Holy Land has taken place in the past several months. Rather, the situation under the Sharon Government has escalated, bringing more death and suffering to the Palestinian people. We are walking on the road of the Via Delorosa every day; a road filled with the thorns of Israeli military occupation and the vinegar of settlers colonialism.

At the International Center of Bethlehem, we are carrying on with our mission as much as possible as the situation gets worse and the needs grow. There is no room now for despair, neither for us nor for our friends. We believe that the Resurrection is a call for action, for every time an innocent is killed and every instance a town is shelled, Christ cries out in the agony of the crucifixion. The forces of death and destruction that we feel besieging us at this time have not caused us to drop the candles we hold as a sign of the abundant life granted through the resurrected Lord.

The helplessness and powerlessness felt by the disciples at the foot of the cross was transformed, through the resurrection, into action.

Therefore, we invite all of you to reach out and overcome your feelings of powerlessness and become involved with us in our work; for it is by working together that we can bring help, hope and healing to our suffering world.

Wishing you all a blessed Easter filled with the joy, power and hope of the Resurrection

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Rana Khoury, Dr. Charlie Haddad, Dr. Nuha Khoury, Rev. Sandra Olewine, Faten Nastas, Viola Raheb, Randa Canawati, Andreas Kuntz, Johannes Zang, Sami Abu Ghazaleh, Nader Nassar, Shadi Hannounneh & Hanneh Abu Saada.