

Letter from the Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem to US President George W. Bush

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh posting is the text of a letter from Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem, Munib A. Younan, sent recently to US President George W. Bush. Its further distribution comes with the bishop's consent.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*Jerusalem on January 31 , 2001The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, D.C.*

Dear Mr. President:

Salaam and grace to you from the City of Peace and all here who are praying for a just peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

On behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan (ELCJ), I would like to congratulate you on the occasion of your inauguration as President of the United States and let you know that you are in our prayers as you continue your public service.

The ELCJ has ministries in Palestine and Israel, as well as in Jordan. As the only Lutheran church in the Middle East, we

concentrate our work on preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments, promoting Christian unity and working for reconciliation among the nations. One of the ways we are able to promote better understanding and peace in this land is through our schools in Jerusalem and on the West Bank.

As we watched the inauguration ceremony, we were pleased to note that your presidency started with prayer. This means that you acknowledge that God has granted you the power and authority of the presidency for a purpose. In your presidential address you stressed that this purpose is to be guided by the basic principles of justice and opportunity for all. Here in the war-torn Middle East, we understand these words as a commitment from your side to work toward a just and lasting peace marked by reconciliation, security, and prosperity.

Mr President, you spoke about peace and we appreciate your words. As I believe you would also affirm, peace is God-given grace. The Almighty God uses presidents, diplomats and ordinary people to be instruments for His divine purpose. The peace of God is peace built on truth, justice, love and reconciliation. As a Palestinian Bishop in Jerusalem, allow me to plead with you to do your utmost to secure a durable peace in our troubled Holy Land. As Psalm 85 says: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other."

We Palestinian indigenous Christians expect and need you to be an honest broker of the peace for which we are longing. In your Middle East policy, we look to you and the United States to help bring freedom, liberation from occupation and security for the Palestinians, as we expect you to promote freedom and security for the Israelis. As a delegation of U.S. church leaders emphasized in their final statement after their visit to Jerusalem in December 2000, quoting an Israeli Jewish peace activist with whom they met: "There can be no Palestinian

freedom without Israeli security, just as there can be no Israeli security without Palestinian freedom.” We urge you to lead genuine negotiations that will soon resolve the issues of Jerusalem, return of refugees, settlements and water in accordance with international laws and standards.

As a Palestinian carrying a refugee card, I believe that the time has come for the international community to acknowledge fully that an injustice has occurred – and is still occurring – toward the Palestinians. Once the injustices done to the Palestinians are recognized, then I believe it will be possible to work out a practical solution acceptable to Israelis and Palestinians, for the future of the refugees. Thus, the path toward reconciliation and lasting peace will be smoother than ever.

In your speech, we were delighted to note a new spirit as you mentioned that the church, the synagogue and the mosque have a role to play in promoting a healthy society. You are right, Mr. President. Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political one, we believe that the three monotheistic religions have much to contribute positively toward peace and reconciliation. Many faithful Jews, Christians and Muslims seek to promote the common values of justice and equality for all people, rich and poor, strong and weak. I want to assure you that there are inter-religious groups steadfastly meeting and working to promote understanding and peace. Some of them are the initiative of our Lutheran Church. The reason for these encounters is simply that we want our Palestinian and Israeli children to grow in love, equality, justice and in the power of forgiveness. They need to learn to see God in the face of each other and thereby mutually recognize each other’s human, civil, religious and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land become a promised land of milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Mr. President, the mothers are sick of bloodshed, the children are filled with fear and trauma, the youth are feeling hatred and revenge, the grassroots are fed up with the conventional and non-conventional weapons, the people are frustrated with harrassment and violence. The present unjust situation cannot be allowed to continue. In the name of our Triune God, we urge you to actively involve your administration in securing a just solution to this long conflict so that Palestinian and Israeli children may develop their nations in security, so that side by side Israel and Palestine will become a paradigm of coexistence, so that both countries will blossom and enjoy economic stability and prosperity.

The just and lasting peace we all are longing for needs to be built on the relevant international resolutions and to allow for the establishment of a viable and independent Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. Both states will share Jerusalem and have their capitals in different parts of the city. We envisage an open Jerusalem where all people will enjoy equal rights and opportunities and have free access to their religious places. This is especially important for all the children – both Palestinian and Israeli – whose common future needs to be secured by allowing them the same rights and opportunities to grow up in a reconciled and peaceful environment.

We want to assure you that our Lutheran Church is part and parcel of the Palestinian presence in the Holy Land. We consider ourselves to be salt in our community. Our God calls us to be catalyts for peace based on justice, promoters of equality, protectors of human and religious rights, bridge-builders between Palestinians and Israelis, initiators of dialogue among religions, ministers of reconciliation and apostles of love.

May I, as the bishop of the Lutheran Church in Jerusalem, cordially invite you to visit Jerusalem. Our Church will be most happy to host you and to keep you informed about the future of Palestinian Christianity. Also, I encourage you to take part when you are able in the ecumenical prayer services for peace in the Middle East taking place on the twenty-second of each month in Washington, D.C. These prayers are a response of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and other US Churches to the appeal of our Lutheran Church to initiate vigil prayers until just peace and reconciliation be implemented, and thereby not to leave us alone in the quest for comprehensive and lasting peace.

May God bless you, Mr. President, in the responsibility God has called you to work for justice, peace, and reconciliation in our troubled land.

*Sincerely,
Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem*