

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON JERUSALEM  
Doha, Qatar. 26-27 February 2012  
Perspective of an Australian Catholic Bishop, Patrick Power

*Background*

My father was of Irish descent and my mother's parents (Abukhalil) migrated from Lebanon to Australia in the 1890s. I am proud of my ancestry but painfully aware of many of the cultural and religious conflicts in both Ireland and Lebanon; at the same time I am heartened by the restoration of peace in both nations in recent times. One of my hopes when made a bishop over 25 years ago was to do what I could to be a bridge-builder and a peace-maker both within my own Church and in the wider community.

Visiting the Holy Land as a pilgrim in 1973 and again in 1988, I was deeply disturbed by what I observed as the harsh treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli authorities. I recognise that there is fault on both sides but there is also a great imbalance of power. On my 1988 visit I witnessed fighter jets, helicopter gunships, armoured tanks and a menacing military presence on the streets, and at one point was confronted with tear gas in Jerusalem.

I deplore any form of violence, but while the Australian/Western media make much of occasional outbreaks by desperate Palestinians, it is rarely acknowledged that in the overall conflict, Palestinian casualties outnumber those of the Israelis by about ten to one.

The increasing number of illegal Israeli settlements resulting from the unjust confiscation of Palestinian homes and land by Israelis is another example of criminal behaviour which the international community, including the United States of America seemingly condones.

In my time as bishop, I have done what I can in Canberra and more widely through the media to other parts of Australia to protest against the injustices perpetrated against the Palestinian people. I welcome participation at this conference as an opportunity to be better informed on the issues and to make whatever contribution I can to peace in the Holy Land.

*The Kairos Palestine Document. A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering.*

This incisive document was issued on 11 December 2009 and is available in a number of languages at HYPERLINK "<http://www.kairopalestine.ps>" [www.kairopalestine.ps](http://www.kairopalestine.ps)

It represents a heartfelt cry from Palestinian Christians "from within the suffering of our country, under the Israeli occupation, with a cry of hope, a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God's divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land..... We address ourselves to our brothers and sisters, members of our Churches in this land. We call out as Christians and as Palestinians to our religious and political leaders, to our Palestinian society and to the Israeli society, to the international community and to our Christian brothers and sisters in the Churches around the world."

I view my participation in this conference as in some small part responding to this moving appeal.

The Palestinian Christians see Jerusalem as central to their struggle: "Jerusalem is the heart of our reality. It is, at the same time, symbol of peace and sign of conflict. While the separation wall divides Palestinian neighbourhoods, Jerusalem continues to be emptied of its Palestinian citizens, Christians and Muslims. Their identity cards are confiscated, which means the loss of their right to reside in Jerusalem. Their homes are demolished or expropriated. Jerusalem, city of reconciliation, has become a city of discrimination and exclusion, a source of struggle rather than peace. Also part of this reality is the Israeli disregard of international law and international resolutions, as well as the paralysis of the Arab world and the international community in the face of this contempt. Human rights are violated and despite the various reports of local and international human rights organisations, the injustice continues."

As the Kairos Palestine Document reaches its conclusion it raises hopes which I am sure are on the hearts of us all at this conference. "Jerusalem is the foundation of our vision and our entire life. She is the city to which God gave a particular importance in the history of humanity. She is the city towards which all people are in movement – and where they will meet in friendship and love in the presence of the One Unique God according to the vision of the prophet Isaiah: *'In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'* (Isaiah 2,2-5). Today, the city is inhabited by two peoples of three religions; and it is on this prophetic vision and on the international resolutions concerning the totality of Jerusalem that any political solution must be based. This is the first issue that should be negotiated because the recognition of Jerusalem's sanctity and message will be a source of inspiration towards finding a solution to the entire problem, which is largely a problem of mutual trust and ability to set in place a new land in this land of God."

The National Council of Churches in Australia meeting in Canberra in July 2010 responded to the Kairos Document adding its voice “to Christian voices throughout the world calling for an early end to the occupation of Palestine through a freely and peacefully negotiated solution in accordance with international law and United Nations resolutions.”

I am aware that historically conflicts between Muslims, Jews and Christians have caused untold loss of life and property and given rise to much hatred and suspicion. But I also believe that these three great faiths which all recognise Abraham as their father in faith are able to draw on the best of their traditions to find solutions which recognise the rights of all the people involved. In publicly opposing the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I asked the question “Is an Iraqi life of any less value than an American life, a British life or an Australian life?” I ask this conference “Is every life in Jerusalem of unique value and is every human right to be strenuously defended? What practical proposals are we able to offer the international community in the quest for peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land?”

*Statement by Australian Church Leaders, Bethlehem 18 December 2007*

This delegation of nine people from a broad spectrum of Christian Churches reported after widely travelling and consulting in Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land. What follows is the substance of their report.

“We were distressed to hear Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, relate the suffering and fear experienced daily by large numbers of their people. We saw and heard evidence of systematic harassment, physical and psychological oppression, widespread unemployment, poverty, and economic deprivation, resulting directly or indirectly from Israeli military occupation of the West Bank. Their suffering compels us to respond, and we assure Palestinians of our compassion and concern.

“We visited Yad Vashem and laid a wreath in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. We heard of Israeli grief and pain resulting from violent attacks and continuing fear of terrorist activity. We condemn all acts of terrorism and assure Israelis of our compassion and concern.

“We recognise the complex nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We strongly affirm the right of both Israel and Palestine to political autonomy, security and self-determination. We join with a large majority of the people of Palestine and Israel in longing for a just and lasting peace. We understand the reluctance to make concessions or to trust those who are the source of fear and oppression, but the time for courageous and inspiring leadership has come.

“In the light of what we have seen and heard during this visit, we support actions to enable Israel and Palestine to negotiate just outcomes on borders, settlements, water, refugees, prisoners, Jerusalem and security.

“We are particularly concerned by the imprisonment of teenagers, mothers with dependent children, and those detained without trial for long periods. We encountered the debilitating effects on the Palestinian economy and impacts on daily life of the segregated road system, the proliferation of checkpoints and road blocks throughout the West Bank, restriction on movement of people and goods, and the effective isolation of Palestinian communities from one another. We were repeatedly told that these matters stand in the way of a just peace.” These observations are consistent with what I understand about the situation in Israel and Palestine.

*Statements of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI*

The Holy See (Vatican) has consistently supported the notion of Jerusalem being a city shared by Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Jews and Christians. The Vatican entered into diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994 and in January 1996, Pope John Paul II welcomed the Representative of the Palestinian People to the meeting with the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See. At this meeting the Pope spoke of the need for a just and adequate solution to be found for the problem of Jerusalem. “The religious and universal dimension of the Holy City demands a commitment on the part of the whole international community, in order to ensure that the City preserves its uniqueness and retains its living character. The Holy Places, dear to the three monotheistic religions, are of course important for believers, but they would lose much of their significance if they were not permanently surrounded by active communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims enjoying true freedom of conscience and religion, and developing their own religious, educational and social activities. The year 1996 should see the beginning of negotiations on the definitive status of the territories under the administration of the National Palestinian Authority, and also on the sensitive issue of the City of Jerusalem. It is my hope that the international community will offer the political partners most directly involved the juridical and diplomatic instruments capable of ensuring that Jerusalem, one and holy, may be truly a ‘crossroads of peace.’”

At the outset of his visit to the Holy Land in March 2000, Pope John Paul expressed his hopes: “I pray that my visit will serve to encourage an increase of interreligious dialogue that will lead Jews, Christians and Muslims to seek in their respective beliefs, and in the universal brotherhood that unites all the members of the human family, the motivation and the perseverance to work for the peace and justice which the peoples of the Holy Land do not yet have and for which they yearn so deeply.”

At the January 2001 assembly of the Diplomatic Corps at the Vatican, Pope John Paul reflected on his visit to

the Holy Land the previous year.” 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 resolutions of the United Nations Organization and the Geneva conventions, to quote only the most important. Otherwise, anything can happen: from unilateral rash initiatives to an extension of violence which will be difficult to control.”

Pope Benedict has continued along similar lines to his predecessor. He visited the Holy Land in May 2009. He spoke with sadness of the lack of peace in Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land. “Even though Jerusalem means ‘city of peace’, it is all too evident that, for decades, peace has tragically eluded the inhabitants of this holy land. The eyes of the world are upon the peoples of this region as they struggle to achieve a just and lasting solution to conflicts that have caused so much suffering. The hopes of countless men, women and children for a more secure and stable future depend on the outcome of negotiations for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In union with people of good will everywhere, I plead with all those responsible to explore every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties, so that peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own, within secure and internationally recognised borders. In this regard, I hope that a greater climate of trust can soon be created that will enable the parties to make real progress along the road to peace and stability.”

At the beginning of 2010, Pope Benedict again spoke strongly about the Holy Land, making a number of points:

The right of the State of Israel to exist and to enjoy peace and security within internationally recognised borders.

The right of the Palestinian people to a sovereign and independent homeland, to live in dignity and to enjoy freedom of movement.

The protection of the identity and sacred character of Jerusalem, and of its cultural and religious heritage which is of universal value.

At Christmas 2010, the Pope repeated his plea for genuine peace in the Holy Land while in his 2011 World Day of Peace message he spoke of the need for genuine religious freedom as a path to peace.

### *Conclusion*

No fair-minded persons can be happy with the current treatment of the Palestinian people. In the face of an Israeli government which is becoming more and more intransigent and dismissive of the rights of Palestinians, they must wonder why the United States and other Western countries stand by idly and helplessly in the face of blatant injustices perpetrated by a government which is scornful of any questioning of its inhumane policies. The treatment of the people of Gaza, the confiscation of Palestinian land and homes, the construction of illegal Israeli settlements, the building of a wall separating Palestinians from each other as well as other obstacles to freedom of movement, the unfair allocation of water are just some of the violations of justice against the Palestinian people. Successive Popes have pointed out that there can be no genuine or lasting peace which is not underpinned by justice. Jerusalem, which is the particular focus of this conference, highlights the plight of the Palestinian people. Deprived of their freedom, homes, property, the opportunity to trade and to work, Palestinians in Jerusalem are even in danger of losing their identity when their papers are confiscated by Israeli authorities.

The 64 years of pain and suffering the Palestinians have endured are enough. This paper has shown how the Catholic Church and other Christians have cried out for peace and justice in the Holy Land.

The Arab League has rightly demanded that Israel end the occupation and withdraw to the 1967 borders.

Jerusalem needs to be secured as a city for all faiths with Muslims and Christians from outside Jerusalem being given the opportunity to pray in the Holy City. Provision needs to be made for the millions of Palestinian refugees by providing a right of return and just compensation in accordance with UN Resolution 194.

I plead for patience and restraint on the part of the Palestinian people, for good will, a sense of justice and practical peace-making actions on the part of Israel and a firm resolve on the part of the international community to broker a peace which is based on justice and respects the dignity and rights of all the people involved. I pray for that climate of trust called for by Pope Benedict and I pray that the God of Abraham will bless these steps towards a peaceful solution in the Holy Land.

(Bishop) Patrick Power  
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