

## **STATUS OF JERUSALEM**

Once more, we have experienced another period of deadly violence in the war in South Lebanon. We still face more death and demolition in Gaza, and more insecurity in the Israeli society. Therefore, we say it is high time to start a serious effort from all parts for a total definitive and just peace. Moreover, we believe that peace must begin in this Holy City of Jerusalem.

Therefore, we present the following statement hoping it will bring a modest contribution to the birth of peace in our Land.

In 1994, we, the Patriarchs and Heads of the local Christian Churches in Jerusalem, published a memorandum entitled "*The Meaning of Jerusalem for Christians*" that insisted on the Christian character of Jerusalem, and on the importance of the Christian presence in her. It also discussed the special political status that must be accorded to the city because of her sacred character. Since that time, we have witnessed the increasing tendency of the political authorities to unilaterally decide the fate of the city and define her status. The access of our faithful and our personnel to Jerusalem is ever-more difficult. With the construction of the wall many of our faithful are excluded from the precincts of the holy city, and according to plans published in the local press, many more will also be excluded in the future. Surrounded by walls, Jerusalem is no longer at the centre and is no longer the heart of life as she should be.

We consider it part of our duty to draw the attention of the local Authorities, as well as the international community and the world Churches, to this very grave situation and call for a concerted effort to search for a common vision on the status of this holy city based on international resolutions and having regard to the rights of two peoples in her and the three faith communities.

In this city, in which God chose to speak to humanity and to reconcile peoples with Himself and among themselves, we raise our voices to say that the paths, followed up till now, have not brought about the pacification of the city and have not reassured normal life for her inhabitants. Therefore they must be changed. The political leaders must search for a new vision as well as for new means.

In God's own design two peoples and three religions have been living together in this city. Our vision is that they should continue to live together in harmony, respect, mutual acceptance and cooperation.

### **1. Jerusalem, Holy City and city of daily life for two peoples and three religions**

Jerusalem, heritage of humanity and holy city, is also the city of daily life for her inhabitants, both Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslim, and for all who are linked to them by family ties as well as for those for whom Jerusalem is the location of their prayer, of their schools, hospitals and work places. Not only historical memories and sacred places of pilgrimage, but also living communities of believers, Jews, Christians and Muslims, make the city of Jerusalem beloved and unique for each one of the three monotheistic faiths. Holy places and living human communities are inseparable.

In addition, both the sacred character of the holy city and the needs of her inhabitants have attracted and continue to attract numerous religious institutions. These have been recognized by the successive authorities throughout the centuries and have acquired certain rights that allow them to fulfill their obligations towards the holy city and her inhabitants.

Consequently, the fundamental rights pertaining to both individuals and institutions must be respected. For individuals, these are basic rights that permit them to exercise their religious, political and social duties and to meet their religious, educational, cultural and medical needs. For communities, this is the right to possess, to freely administer the works necessary for their ministry and their overall human development – churches, monasteries, schools, hospitals, social institutions, theological and biblical institutes, accommodation for pilgrims, etc. It also includes the right to bring in the personnel and avail of the means needed for the proper functioning of the institutions.

## **2. Requirements for a just and durable solution for the Jerusalem question**

The future of the city must be decided by common agreement, through collaboration and consultation and not imposed by power and force. Unilateral decisions or imposed solutions will continue to be very detrimental to peace and security.

Different solutions are possible. The city of Jerusalem might remain united but sovereignty in this case must be shared, exercised according to a principle of equality by both Israelis and Palestinians. However, the city might also be divided if this be the desire of the two peoples who live here, with two distinct sovereignties, the aim of which would be to reach a true unity of hearts in the two parts of the city. The wall, which tears apart the city at more than one point and which excludes a great number of her inhabitants must give way to an education that will strengthen mutual trust and acceptance.

Face to face with the inability of the parties involved to find a just and durable solution up until the present time, the assistance of the international community is a necessity. In the future too, this aid needs to continue in the form of guarantees that will ensure the stability of the agreements reached by the two sides.

We recommend to create as soon as possible, an ad hoc committee to reflect on the future of the city. In this committee the local Churches of Jerusalem must be a part.

## **3. Special status – Open City**

Jerusalem, holy city, heritage of humanity, city of **two peoples and three religions**, has a unique character that distinguishes her from all the other cities of the world; a character which surpasses any local political sovereignty. “*Jerusalem is too precious to be dependent solely on municipal or national political authorities*” (Cf. Memorandum, 1994). Jerusalem’s two peoples are the guardians of her sanctity and carry a double responsibility: to organize their lives in the city and to welcome all the “pilgrims” who come from around the world. The needed international collaboration is not meant to replace the role and the sovereignty of her two peoples. It is rather needed in order to help both peoples to reach the definition and the stability of the **special status** of the city. That is why, concretely, and from the political, economic and social point of view, her two peoples must bestow on Jerusalem a special status that corresponds to her double character, holy and universal, and ordinary and local, where daily life unfolds. Once this status has been found and defined, the international community is required to confirm it with international guaranties that will assure continuing peace and respect for all.

The components of this special status must include the following elements:

- a- *“The human right of freedom of worship and of conscience for all, both as individuals and as religious communities”* (cf. Memorandum 1994).
- b- Equality of all her inhabitants before the law, in coordination with the international resolutions.
- c- Free access to Jerusalem for all, citizens, residents or pilgrims, at all times, whether in peace or in war. Therefore Jerusalem should be an open city.
- d- *The “rights of property ownership, custody and worship which the different Churches have acquired throughout history should continue to be retained by the same communities. These rights which are already protected in the Status Quo of the Holy Places according to historical “firmans” and other documents, should continue to be recognized and respected”* (cf Memorandum 1994).
- e- The various Christian Holy Places in the city, wherever they are, must remain united in geography, whatever the solution envisaged.

## **Conclusion**

For Jews, Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem is a high place of revelation and of God’s encounter with humanity. That is why we cannot remain indifferent to her fate nor remain silent in the face of her sufferings. *“For Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch”* (Is 62:1).

We are launching this solemn appeal to all the religious leaders in the Holy Land to collaborate together in order to reach a common vision of the city that might unite the hearts of all believers. We call on our political authorities to seek out the common points of agreement and, in co-operation with the religious authorities, to find a solution which corresponds to the city’s sacred character.

We hope that our appeal might be heard and that the political leaders, respecting the nature of this holy city, might show themselves capable of reaching a final and definitive agreement that might make of Jerusalem a true sign of the presence of God and of His peace among all.

+ *Patriarch Theophilos III*: Greek Orthodox Patriarchate  
 + *Patriarch Michel Sabbah*: Latin Patriarchate.  
 + *Patriarch Torkom II*: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate.  
*Rev Pier Battista Pizziballa*, ofm, Custos of the Holy Land  
 + *Anba Abraham*: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate.  
 + *Swerios Malki Mourad*: Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate.  
 + *Abune Grima*: Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate  
 + *Paul Nabil Sayyah*: Maronite Patriarchal Exarchate.  
 + *Bishop Riab Abu Al-Assal*: Episcopal Church of Jerusalem & the Middle East.  
 + *Bishop Mounib Younan*: Lutheran Evangelical Church.  
 + *Pierre Malki*: Exarch for the Syrian Catholics - Jerusalem  
 + *George Bakar*: Greek Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate  
*Rev Rafael Minassian*: Armenian Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate.

Jerusalem, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006