

In commemoration of signing the Comprehensive Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine

Born nearby the Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour, Fr. Zacharia Shomali (1897) was certainly one of the most committed Catholic priests in the history of Palestine. Having been ordered a priest in 1920, his priesthood came during the turbulent years of the British Mandate of Palestine, and at a time when Great Britain was crafting its plan in creating a Jewish state in Palestine. Fr. Shomali's choice was to join the struggle of his people for national liberation by bringing hope, providing a solid testimony for a just peace.

The communities of Gaza, Nablus, Taybeh, Bir Zeit and Jenin, in addition to Beit Sahour and Jerusalem among others, knew of his abnegation and love for them. He joined the voices of Palestine, Christians and Muslims, in demanding freedom, national independence and a dignified life for his people. Fr. Shomali passed away in 1963, after having seen the Nakba, catastrophe of his people, and how his church once again took the lead in providing humanitarian and spiritual support for those in need. Those were the times of the beginning of the Pontifical Mission in Palestine as an effort to support Palestinian refugees.

For many, Fr. Shomali remains one of the anonymous voices in the long struggle for Palestinian freedom. But for those with knowledge about the role of the Catholic church in Palestine, they would put his memory in the level of others such as Bishop Gregorios Hajjar, Fr. Ibrahim Ayyad, Bishop Cappucci and Patriarch Michel Sabbah, represent to the Palestinian people what Fr. Andre Jarlan represented for the Chileans under Pinochet's dictatorship and Archbishop Desmond Tutu means for the South Africans struggling against the Apartheid. This strong moral conviction over their message for a just peace and equality represents the importance of Christianity in Palestine. Thus, the Palestine-Holy See relations go well beyond a political recognition or tax exemptions. It rather honors the central role that Christianity has as part of the social fabric of Palestine; the cradle of Christianity, where our Lord Jesus Christ was born, lived and was crucified.

This is precisely what the Palestinian side aimed at fulfilling through the historic Palestine – Holy See Comprehensive Agreement signed on 26/02/2015. The process, worked under direct instructions from President Abbas and in consultation with various Palestinian ministries, aimed at providing the churches in Palestine with well-deserved benefits in order to continue their historic mission. And as the heads of churches were forced to close the Holy Sepulcher due to Israeli pressures to force them to pay taxes against the historic and legal status quo of the holy city of

Jerusalem, we look into constructive ways to facilitate their work and ensure the very presence of the Church in the Holy Land.

The agreement serves as a model to the rest of our region. This doesn't have to do only with its comprehensiveness (8 chapters with 32 articles), but with its message: Christian – Muslim coexistence isn't just possible, it's a must. The Catholic church enjoys full autonomy under Palestinian law just as the Holy See has recognized the State of Palestine on the 1967 border. And while there are still some challenges towards the full implementation of the agreement, it is clear that our relations are based on a very solid ground that is centuries old.

It is early afternoon in Bethlehem and the children from Terra Sancta School run and play around the Nativity Square after finishing their classes. This has been repeated since 1598, being this Catholic school the oldest one still functioning in Palestine. Many of their graduates have ended up living in exile due to the difficult political and economic conditions. In our vision, a free and sovereign State of Palestine would be the best way to ensure the future of a vibrant Christian community in Palestine. We believe that our bilateral agreement can contribute in the current attempts to support the struggle of those Palestinians, both Christians and Muslims, to end the occupation and to live in peace and mutual respect within the international borders of the two states Israel and Palestine.

The Israeli imposed separation between Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine, lack of access to religious sites, the construction of the annexation wall, including in known places of Christian significance such as Cremisan and the Mount of Olives, confiscation of land, division of families through irrational laws and every single element attached to the military regime being imposed by Israel in Palestine, should not kill our hope. As it was said by our late president Yasser Arafat "there's no Palestine without Christians". This is our national identity.

At a moment where groups of Christian Zionists negatively influence foreign policies and try to distort the history of our land, the Israeli government and the Trump administration make use of religious arguments taken from the Bible in order to justify their support for wrong policies and the oppression of the Palestinian people. This should not be tolerated. Not only because of our history, but because of our values.

Fr. Zacharia Shomali is buried in his hometown Beit Sahour. Following his committed example, several of his relatives became priests since his departure. They

have all delivered a message of hope, in a tradition that began in their hometown when the shepherds saw the star of Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. Their commitment, just like the one of hundreds of Palestinian priests, remind us of the simple yet powerful words from the Holy Bible “They say: ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14).