

# The Holy See and Jerusalem

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It is Jerusalem that has brought us together. It is Jerusalem that urges us to look to the future.

And Jerusalem, yet again, wishes to impart its secret, the secret which the Prophet Ezekiel disclosed for all time: *"And the name of the city henceforth shall be, The Lord is there"* (Ez. 48:35).

On behalf of us all, I think it is right that I should thank His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah for the warm welcome extended to us, as well as for the spiritual joy he has brought us by gathering us together for the sake of the Holy City.

This cause of the Holy City has long been at the center of the Holy See's concerns and one of its top priorities for international action, ever since the Jerusalem question existed.

### I. The Jerusalem question

Indeed, there is a conflict, or rather there are conflicts, because of and within Jerusalem - all related to its universally accepted uniqueness. It is unique in itself, and consequently it is also unique in its conflicts. It is different from any other city. The introduction to a book published in 1994 by a number of important Israeli academics begins thus: *"At least in three respects Jerusalem differs from most other places: the City is holy to the adherents of three religions, it is the subject of conflicting national claims by two peoples, and its population is heterogeneous to a considerable degree"* (1). Let us remember what Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter "Redemptionis Anno" of 20 April 1984: *"...Jews ardently love (Jerusalem) and in every age venerate her memory, abundant as she is in many remains and monuments from the time of David who chose her as the capital, and of Solomon who built the Temple there. Therefore, they turn their minds to her daily, one may say, and point to her as the sign of their nation."*

*"Christians honor her with a religious and intent concern because there the words of Christ so often resounded, there the great events of the Redemption were accomplished: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. In the City of Jerusalem the first Christian community sprang up and remained throughout the centuries a continual ecclesial presence despite difficulties."*

"Muslims also call Jerusalem "holy", with a profound attachment that goes back to the origins of Islam and springs from the fact that they have there many special places of pilgrimage and for more than a thousand years have dwelt there, almost without interruption."

II. I think it is important to clarify from the very start that when we speak of Jerusalem the distinction often made between "the question of the Holy Places and the question of Jerusalem" is unacceptable to the Holy See. It is obvious that the Holy Places derive their meaning and their cultic and cultural uses from their intimate connection with the surrounding environment, to be understood not merely in terms of geography but also and most especially in its urban, architectural and above all human community and institutional dimensions.

In papal documents there certainly exist emphases and nuances, and they are seen more clearly the greater the span of time under consideration, for example, in a book edited by Archbishop Edmond Farhat (2) in which he gathers papal documents from 1887 to 1986 (one hundred years), dividing this span of time into three periods:

1) from 1887 to 1947 (the first war between Arabs and Israelis), when the Popes spoke of the Holy Land in general and of Jerusalem, insisting primarily on the need to protect the physical integrity of the Holy Places and on the needs of the local Catholics;

2) from 1947 to 1964 (Pope Paul VI's pilgrimage): here the stress is on safeguarding the Holy Places, on freedom of access for all the faithful of the three religions and the right of each of the three religions to have control of its own holy sites;

3) from 1964 to the present day, a period during which the emphasis moves to Jerusalem in a global context and to the preservation of its identity and vocation: the Holy Places; the areas surrounding them; guarantees for everybody of their own cultural and religious identity; freedom of religion and conscience for the inhabitants and the pilgrims; the cultural dimension.

III. From the references to historical events, particularly those of the last fifty years, there emerges what is commonly referred to as the "political dimension" of Jerusalem in a complex of situations which have arisen regarding territorial control and the actions carried out to gain such control. The concern expressed in the interventions of the Popes and in other documents of the Holy See could not and cannot overlook this aspect. It is ever present, first, in order to prevent the Holy City becoming a battlefield and later to ensure that it does not become, as is the situation today, a case of manifest international injustice. The situation today has been brought about and is maintained by force. The Holy See has spoken out on this and will continue to speak out clearly, without mincing words and consistently adhering to the position of the majority within the international community, as expressed above all in the pertinent United Nations Resolutions.

Since 1967, a part of the City has been occupied militarily and subsequently annexed. In that part of the City are to be found most of the Holy Places of the three monotheistic Religions. East Jerusalem is illegally occupied. It is therefore wrong to claim that the Holy See is only interested in the religious aspect or aspects of the City and overlooks the political and territorial aspect. The Holy See is indeed interested in this aspect and has the right and duty to be, especially insofar as the matter remains unresolved and is the cause of conflict, injustice, human rights violations, restrictions of religious freedom and conscience, fear and personal insecurity. Obviously, the Holy See's immediate and practical concern is with religious questions, while in other

matters - political, economic, etc. - it interests itself inasmuch as they have a moral dimension. If the Holy See has no competence to enter into territorial disputes between Nations, to take sides, to seek to impose detailed solutions, on the contrary it has the right and duty of reminding the Parties of the obligation to resolve controversies peacefully, in accordance with the principles of justice and equity within the international legal framework.

In the case of Jerusalem, both aspects, the religious and the political and territorial, are closely linked, even though they are different in their constitutive elements, in the proper means of dealing with them and in finding a solution to them.

#### **IV. What is the Holy See requesting for Jerusalem?**

1) First of all. it asks that Jerusalem be respected for what it is in itself or rather what it should be, compared with what it actually is. That is what I defined a short while ago as the vocation or identity of the Holy City. Jerusalem is a treasure of the whole of humanity. In view of a situation of evident conflict and considering the rapid transformation of the Holy City, any unilateral solution or one brought about by force is not and cannot be a solution at all.

It is the view of the Holy See that every exclusive claim - be it religious or political - is contrary to the logic proper to the very City itself. I must insist: every citizen of Jerusalem and every person who visits Jerusalem should embody the message of dialogue, coexistence and respect evoked by the City. Exclusive claims cannot be backed up by numerical or historical criteria

Having said that, I must add that there is nothing to prevent Jerusalem, in its unity and uniqueness, becoming the symbol and the national centre of both the Peoples that claim it as their Capital. But if Jerusalem is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, it is also sacred to many people from every part of the world who look to it as their spiritual capital or travel there on pilgrimage, to pray and to meet their brethren in faith. It is the cultural heritage of everybody, including those who visit it simply as tourists.

2) Consequently, the Holy See believes that there is an obligation to find a realistic solution to the problems of Jerusalem, to all of them, according to their particular characteristics.

a. There is a political problem concerning Jerusalem for Israelis and Palestinians first of all which is very practical. The Madrid Conference of 1991 and what followed gave birth to hopes of a peaceful future. Hopes founded on a willingness to talk, to negotiate and to seek to compromise. Hopes which appeared well-founded also by reason of the commitment and efforts of a large section of the international community, and in particular of the United States of America, as the events which took place at Wye Plantation in the last few days have demonstrated. Let us hope that the aspirations for dialogue and peace will contribute to the implementation of what has been agreed upon.

In this context, which is certainly both complex and delicate, the Jerusalem question has been placed at the bottom of the agenda. It is understandable that the difficulty

and delicacy of the question of Jerusalem have meant that it has been left till last. But we all know, and the Israelis and the Palestinians are the first in this, that peace and coexistence in the Holy Land and Middle East have no future, unless an answer is found to the political question of Jerusalem. Allow me to quote once again from "Redemptionis Anno" of 1984, in which His Holiness Pope John Paul II wrote: *"I am convinced that the failure to find an adequate solution to the question of Jerusalem, and the resigned postponement of the problem, only compromise further the longed-for peaceful and just settlement of the crisis of the whole Middle East."*

What does the Holy See mean by an "adequate solution"? It means recognizing that the situation today is one of conflict. It means that Israelis and Palestinians, with the collaboration of all who can help them, have to reach an agreement which corresponds in some way to their particular legitimate and reasonable aspirations, and respects the principles of justice.

b. As far as the Holy See is concerned, however, the solution of a territorial dispute alone is not enough for Jerusalem, precisely because Jerusalem is an unparalleled reality: it is part of the patrimony of the whole world. And the whole world has shown that it is fully aware of this when, for example, through resolutions of the United Nations it has sought to defend that patrimony.

Looking to Jerusalem, the Holy See continues to ask that it be protected by "a special internationally guaranteed Statute". What is meant by this? In the Holy See's view: - the historical and material characteristics of the City, as well as its religious and cultural characteristics, must be preserved, and perhaps today it is necessary to speak of restoring and safeguarding those still existing; - there must be equality of rights and treatment for those belonging to the communities of the three religions found in the City, in the context of the freedom of spiritual, cultural, civic and economic activities; - the Holy Places situated in the City must be preserved, and the rights of freedom of religion and worship, and of access, for residents and pilgrims alike, whether from the Holy Land itself or from other parts of the world, must be safeguarded.

At stake is the basic question of preserving and protecting the identity of the Holy City in its entirety, in every aspect. For example, the simple "extraterritoriality" of the Holy Places, with the assurance that pilgrims would be able to visit them without hindrance, would not suffice. The identity of the City includes a sacred character which belongs not just to the individual sites or monuments, as if these could be separated from one another or isolated from the respective communities. The sacred character involves Jerusalem in its entirety, its holy places and its communities with their schools, hospitals, cultural, social and economic activities.

Israelis and Palestinians, in the desired search for a political settlement of their conflict over Jerusalem, cannot overlook the fact that the City has aspects which go far beyond their legitimate national interests. They, therefore, have to take these aspects into consideration in looking for and in reaching a lasting political and territorial solution. In the same way, they will not be able to avoid giving due consideration to the efforts and demands of all legitimately interested parties. In this, Israelis and Palestinians must not feel in any way restricted, but rather honored and reassured.

V. It is essential that the parties to the negotiations take fair and appropriate account of the sacred and universal character of the City. This requires that any possible solution should have the support of the three monotheistic Religions, both at the local level and at the international level. Besides, as they are being proposed, the negotiations are expected to include the participation of the sponsors of the Peace Process and other parties could also be invited to contribute. The Holy See believes in the importance of extending representation at the negotiating table: in order to be sure that no aspect of the problems is overlooked and to affirm that the whole International Community is responsible for the uniqueness and sacredness of this incomparable City.

## **Conclusion**

In these coming days we shall listen to various other presentations and reflections. I would like to end my own intervention by expressing two feelings which I have experienced with great intensity:

a) Sometimes I have felt great sadness and almost a sense of helplessness: the way forward to peace for the Holy Land and Jerusalem appears very precarious, alternating between progress and hesitation or failure. One has the impression that anything could or be it good or bad. That also about the Year 2000, I wish to quote a few words which Pope John Paul II addressed to the Diplomatic Corps on 11 January 1992: "*What a blessing it would be if this Holy Land, where God spoke and Jesus walked, could become a special place of encounter and prayer for peoples, if this Holy City of Jerusalem could be a sign and instrument of peace and reconciliation! It is here that believers have a mission of primary importance to accomplish. Forgetting the past and looking to the future, they are called to repentance, to re-examine their behaviour and to realize once again that they are brothers and sisters by reason of the one God who loves them and invites them to cooperate in his plan for humanity*".

b) And the second of my feelings: Episcopates of important Nations of the world are represented here. The Bishops are in communion and solidarity with each other, and the initiative of His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah is founded on this certainty. In the name of the Holy Father and together with the Patriarch I say to you all: let us remember Jerusalem, let us recall its essential nature, its vocation and the love which people have for it, let us help the world and those who wield power in it to remember Jerusalem and to understand that for its sake it should not be impossible to make it definitively a place of meeting, of harmony and of peace. It is my earnest hope that the Episcopates of the world will become Jerusalem's "Ambassadors" within the local Churches, to your respective Nations and societies and to the institutions and Authorities thereof. "Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!" (Ps. 137:6).

(1) Ruth Lapidoth-Moshe Hirsch, *The Jerusalem Question and its Resolutions: selected documents*, Dordecht-Boston, London 1994. (2) *Gerusalemme nei Documenti Pontifici*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982.