

EIR Conference Report

‘End the Occupation!’ Say Palestinian Christian Bishops

by Edward Spannaus

At an extraordinary gathering in Washington—which presented a dramatic counterpoint to the ravings of the Christian Zionists which dominate the Bush Administration—four of the leading Christian Bishops in Jerusalem forcefully and repeatedly raised the demand for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and for justice for all Palestinians—Muslims and Christians alike. Also set forth, was the demand that the United States stop using its veto in the UN Security Council, particularly in regard to the World Court ruling on the illegality of the Separation Wall now being built by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon.

One of the Bishops noted that the Palestinian Christian leaders are often criticized for speaking out against the Israeli occupation and against injustice, instead of just sticking to preaching the Gospel. “I am a Palestinian,” Bishop Munib Younan declared. “My people and I are experiencing injustice and military occupation, as well as the accompanying problems of hunger, illness, loneliness, imprisonment and being treated as strangers and intruders in our own land!”

But despite the oppression and indignities which they, along with all Palestinians suffer daily, they are also an optimistic group, seeing themselves as the peacemakers, and uniquely as a bridge for reconciliation in the Middle East.

The four Bishops, who were in Washington to participate in the Sixth Annual Conference of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) on Oct. 22-23, are: His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem; Rt. Rev. Riah Abu El-Assal, Bishop of the Episcopal Church; Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; and Archimandrite Innokentios Exarchos, representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem.

A Holy Land Without Christians

Under the Israeli occupation, Palestinian Christians have gone from being 20% of the population in the West Bank and Gaza, to about one and one-half percent today. The fundamental cause for the emigration of the Palestinian Christians, is the same as for Palestinian Muslims: the Israeli occupation, and the desperate conditions of life which the occupation has engendered.

As the Episcopal Bishop, Riah Abu El-Assal, put it during the conference: There was no problem under Arab rule, during which the Christian population remained stable, but, he pointed out, the driving out of Christian Palestinians began with the land seizures of 1948, and accelerated after the seizure of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Bishop Younan reported that, at the current rate of emigration, in 15 years there will be no Christians in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ. “What is the Holy Land, without Palestinian Christians?” he asked.

Bishop Younan also explained that the Christians are emigrating because of the hopeless situation in which they are living under the occupation. “They would like a better life, but they can’t: the Wall is preventing them, the checkpoints are preventing them, the indignities are preventing them. This is inhuman.” He noted that unemployment among Palestinians under the military occupation is 70%, and that 65% of the Palestinian population is living below the poverty line, which the World Bank calculates at \$2.00 a day.

The Rev. Innokentios Exarchos, of the Greek Orthodox Church, also stressed the urgency of addressing the problem of unemployment, which, he noted, runs 80-90% in some areas.

In response to a question about the situation in Bethlehem,



The Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation opened with a press conference in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 22. Left to right: Father Emil Salayta (representing the Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah), Archimandrite Immokentios Exarchos, Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, and Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan.

Bishop El-Assal reported that the last real Christmas in Bethlehem was at the Millennium, i.e., in 2000. Today, he said, “Bethlehem is dark; there are checkpoints to get in and out, electricity poles have been destroyed by tanks. . . . There is hardly anything for life in that city.” Last year, he said, was the first time he could get close to the Church of the Nativity with his car; usually you have to park a mile away. “There were no lights, no people. . . .” El-Assal blamed not only the Israelis for this, but also “the indifference of Christians in the West.”

‘It Is a Calling for Us To Be Here’

Bishop El-Assal elaborated this, at another point, saying that “it’s not just the Israeli occupation, the Israeli Army’s destruction of 400 towns and villages from 1948 to 1950,” but that the problem is also this: “Many Christians in the West aligned themselves with the others, not with us, as if we are not equal brothers and sisters in Christ. We were left to die on the side of the road. Here in Washington, and certainly in the ‘Bible Belt,’ Christian Zionism seems to be controlling quite a bit of the minds of many in the Administration. That’s why we have been neglected, that’s why we have been ignored, that is why we have been left to die. We can’t be left without a homeland. Imagine if Israel were left without a homeland, without aid from the United States. That’s what’s going to happen to our people, the Christians. Is it because we are Arab Palestinians?”

Father Emil Salayta, a Jordanian-born Roman Catholic and a founder of the HCEF, picked up on this theme, saying: “We are not talking about small groups of Christians in the Holy Land. We’re talking about one Christian family, preserving a symbol of the continuity of faith of 2000 years, and survival of the Mother Church.”

Father Emil said that Palestinian Christians often ask: “Why should we stay here, in the land of Jesus, and pay a high price—forgotten, and isolated, and misunderstood, and sometimes rejected—without being helped or assisted by the global church, the universal church, and by brothers and sisters in faith worldwide?”

“We believe that it’s our calling to be Christian in the land of Jesus, in the midst of two different religions, and two different cultures—Islam and Judaism. We believe that, although we are a suffering church, we are still the Church of Golgotha, the Church of the Via Dolorosa . . . the Mother Church of the Holy Sepulchre. . . .”

“We believe it is a calling for us to be here. We are suffering, we are crucified every day as Palestinian Christians, as part of our whole nation, but we are waiting for the day of liberation, we are waiting for the day of the Resurrection.”

Father Emil said that, as Palestinian Christians, “we hope to play a major peacemaking role and reconciliation, since we have a common ground with both sides,” explaining: “We have our Bible as the common ground with Judaism; and we have our roots, our culture, our language, and our destiny, with our brothers and sisters the Palestinians, since we are Arabs.”

The Scourge of Christian Zionism

Palestinian Christians—who trace themselves to the first Pentecost—are truly the “forgotten faithful.” Ignored by the American press, most American Christians probably don’t even know they exist. But the ignorance or the indifference of Western Christians is only part of the problem; far more outrageous, is that the many so-called Evangelical Christians in the U.S.—better described as Christian Zionists—support the efforts of Israeli fanatics to expel the Palestinians from

their homeland, basing themselves on the theologically-fraudulent claim that God gave the all the land to the Jews, and that expelling the Palestian Arabs, and rebuilding the Third Temple, will hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The treacherous role of the Christian Zionists, exacerbated by their grip over the Bush Administration, was a recurring theme of the conference. Bishop El-Assal noted how the Christian Zionists raised millions of dollars for Israel and for the settlers, and he particularly singled out the Televangelist Pat Robertson, who came to Israel for the Festival of the Tabernacle, with 4,000 people. "They embarrassed us local Christians, as they do everytime," El-Assal said. "He challenged the Israelis; 'God gave this land to you, don't give back an inch of land to those wretched Arabs.' "

Bishop Younan denounced Christian Zionism as heresy and as a "sick ideology," in his address to the conference. (See *Interview*.)

"In some Christian churches," he said, "the whole Bible, or the Old Testament, is used in an eschatological way, using the Apocalyptic books, to justify the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, and the building of the Third Temple, as a way of hastening the Second Coming of Jesus, and the Armageddon War. . . . These sick ideologies—not theology—grounded not in grace, but in fear, masquerade as Christianity. The Catholic Bishops in Illinois called this ideology a 'false teaching.' I call it heresy. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a pri-

marily political problem, not a religious one. Religion should be used positively, for a solution, and not to inflame the situation further.

A New U.S. President?

Although President Bush meets frequently with leaders of the Religious Right in the U.S., he has refused to meet with Palestinian Christian leaders, and in fact he does not even meet with the heads of the so-called "mainstream" churches in the U.S. *EIR* asked about this at the press conference. Bishop El-Assal said that they had attempted to meet with both President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair; they were eventually able to meet with Blair, but "there was no real reaching the President," and they never had a meeting with Bush, "for reasons we've not been told."

Bishop Younan said that after the upcoming U.S. elections, "a new President will hear from us, what we really think." He urged American Christians to take the responsibility, to see that such a meeting takes place. "To meet us is not a luxury," he continued, "it's really to speak about the needs of Palestinian and Arab Christians, and the Palestinian people, at this time."

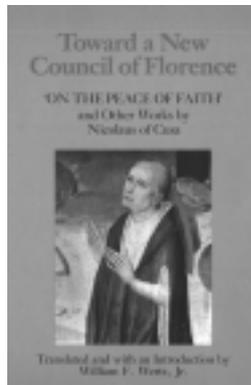
Although Sen. John Kerry has not distinguished himself with regard to the Middle East conflict, there was still hope among many conference participants, that Kerry might bring a fresh approach to dealing with the region, if for no other reason, than that he is not in the thrall of Christian Zionists and the Religious Right in the United States.

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Interview: Patriarch Michel Sabbah

The Christian's Role Is Reconciliation

His Beatitude Michel Sabbah was born in Jerusalem, and has been the Patriarch of Jerusalem since 1987; he is the Bishop of the Roman Catholics in the Middle East, that is, those who follow the Western liturgy. H.B. Sabbah was interviewed by Edward Spannaus during the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington, on Oct. 23.

EIR: You mentioned that the Holy Places should be a place to pray, and for conversion, not to make war. Are you referring to the fact that some of the Christian Zionists, when they come to the Middle East, have a different purpose?

Sabbah: The reference is to what is going on in the Holy Land. Both the Israelis and Palestinians are making war because of their holy places. Everyone wants their holy places.