

Position paper on the Middle East, Palestine, and Israel.

In January 2017, the Bishops who make up the Holy Land Coordination, (HLC) produced their annual report on the situation in Palestine and Israel and how we, as Catholics, should respond. You can find it here: <http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Departments/International-Affairs/Holy-Land/Holy-Land-Co-ordination/Holy-Land-Coordination-2017> Please read this carefully.

The Bishops tell us that the occupation of the West Bank is unjust, that we must pray and that we have a duty, a responsibility, to act on behalf of the Palestinians. Some extracts:

"For fifty years the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza have languished under occupation, violating the human dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis. This is a scandal to which we must never become accustomed.

"As Bishops we implore Christians in our home countries to recognise our own responsibility for prayer, awareness and action.

"We all have a responsibility to oppose the construction of settlements. This de facto annexation of land not only undermines the rights of Palestinians in areas such as Hebron and East Jerusalem but, as the UN recently recognised, also imperils the chance of peace.

"We all have a responsibility to provide assistance for the people of Gaza, who continue to live amid a man-made humanitarian catastrophe.

"We all have a responsibility to encourage non-violent resistance which, as Pope Francis reminds us, has achieved great changes across the world.

"We all have a responsibility to promote a two-state solution....

"We all have a responsibility to help the local Church, its agencies, volunteers and NGOs....

"The Bible tells us "You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country's inhabitants" [*Leviticus 25:10*]. During this fiftieth year of occupation we must pray for the liberty of everyone in the Holy Land and practically support all those working to build a just peace."

Our responsibilities are laid out clearly. Since the HLC report 12 months ago there have been some significant developments. This year was the 50th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank in 1967. Instead of any move on the part of the occupying forces to alleviate the situation and proclaim liberation for all, the process of building settlements in the occupied territories has continued apace. The Israeli government ignores all appeals for this illegal occupation to be reversed and instead passes laws to try to legitimize the position.

The U.S.A. has in past years tried to broker peace talks which have failed. With the new President, Donald Trump, elected he has carried out a pre-election promise to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. This has been met with almost universal condemnation because East Jerusalem is Palestinian, and would be the capital of Palestine if a two-state agreement could be reached.

At the United Nations Security Council on 18th December, a motion condemning the move to recognise Jerusalem was vetoed by the United States. 14 of the 15 countries making up the Security Council voted for this motion. A few days later a further motion condemning the move to recognise Jerusalem as capital of Israel was put to the General Assembly. President Trump threatened any country who voted in support of the resolution that the U.S. would withdraw any financial help and aid. In the event the motion carried with 128 votes in favour and 9 against. There were 35 abstentions.

As a result of Trump's announcement that the U.S. will move its Embassy to Jerusalem, tensions in the area have increased again. Hamas, in Gaza, has called for retaliations and rockets have been fired

into Israel. This has led to retaliatory strikes by Israel. We have seen all this before. The situation is extremely serious.

The Israeli Government's policies of building settlements on land which was annexed during the six day war of 1967, and which is condemned as illegal by the international community, does not only affect Palestine. Jerusalem and some of the surrounding towns is at the heart of three major religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. For a long time there has been mutual recognition of rights and access to the Holy Places known as the status quo. This is now under serious threat.

Patriarch Theophilus III, the leader of the Orthodox Church has warned that Jewish settlers want to take over sites in the Old City by introducing a "church lands" bill. They could then begin removing any non-Jew. This will threaten the very presence of Christians in Jerusalem. The Patriarchate has lodged an appeal in the Israeli High Court to prevent this.

A delegation from the Holy Land has just visited the U.K. to seek support for their fight against this Bill. Cardinal Vincent said the proposed bill represented "an intolerable infringement of the status quo and the legitimate rights of the churches, and should be recognised for what it is: an attack on the property rights of the Christian community".

So the situation in the Holy Land, Palestine, Jerusalem and Israel is very serious. We need to accept the responsibilities the Bishops have indicated and act accordingly. We can educate ourselves and learn more of the situation. We can join some of the organisations which are working to promote peace and justice. We can lobby our Members of Parliament. We can provide practical help to those suffering and most of all we can pray. We can pray as individuals, and also as communities.

The HLC will be making their annual visit shortly. I will post a link to their report as soon as it is available.

Phil Mayland.

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