

Justice and Peace Commission
Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land
Christmas Message 2023
Jerusalem

*“The angel said: I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared
by the whole people” (Lk 2:10).*

As we prepared to enter the novena before Christmas, we received the horrific news of the attack on the Holy Family parish in Gaza. At midday on December 16, an Israeli sniper murdered Naheda and Samar, mother and daughter, in the church courtyard. Seven more were wounded as they tried to protect those in the church. That morning an Israeli missile slammed into the home of the Missionaries of Charity, wreaking destruction and putting the lives of the 54 disabled residents in even graver danger. Lord have mercy!

Christmas is the feast of great joy. The Eternal Word of God, *“became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory”* (Jn 1: 14). He came to save us and fill us with his joy. Advent precedes Christmas as time for us to wake up, a call to pay attention, to wait for the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the great joy he brings to us. It is also the time to be alive to the suffering of our brothers and sisters in the world, and here, around us. After witnessing more than seventy days of war, we in the Holy Land approach the manger in Bethlehem this year with broken hearts. We pray and ask for joy, instead of sorrow that surrounds us at the death of so many.

Thousands of men, women and children - Palestinian and Israeli - have been killed in the latest round of violence. In Gaza, more Palestinian children have been killed in the last two months than in the preceding two years of war in all of the conflicts worldwide. The war has taken an enormous toll on an entire generation of our children, who live in daily fear for themselves and their families.

The Gaza Strip is being pummeled with bombs and mortar fire that leave neighborhoods flattened. About two million people have been displaced, most of them are without shelter and constantly on the move. Even schools and places of worship are not safe places. In fact, more than 85% of Gaza’s population has been displaced in a narrow strip of land where there seems to be no safe place. The vast majority of hospitals and clinics are not functioning. 91% of Gazans report going to sleep hungry.

We lament the loss of life, fear for the wounded who have little access to medical care, and are anguished for the homeless.

In Bethlehem as well as across the West Bank, Israeli army incursions leave many dead and result in massive arrests. There, closures of the territories have led to many losing their jobs, with families struggling to put food on the table. Christmas celebrations have been canceled, so that we as Christians might be in solidarity with all those who suffer in war. We are encouraged to focus on the deeper meaning of Christmas.

And what is that deeper meaning? As we walk together towards the manger, this year we pray that we might touch, concretely, the Good News God promised to us. As people of hope, we await the birth of the Prince of Peace. And we remember that we are never alone, for God chose this place in which to enter into the darkness as Emmanuel, God with us.

We ask all those who celebrate Christmas all over the world: pray with us. Pray for peace in Bethlehem, in Gaza and all over the Holy Land. We pray for an end to violence and a release of all captives. We pray for a permanent ceasefire and for the dawning of a time of dialogue instead of oppression, of justice instead of imposed solutions, of living together instead of the dream of getting rid of one another. We implore those in positions of power to help end a conflict that has been going on for more than a century, facilitate a path towards a just peace based on equality, so that this war might be the last and our children might finally witness hope instead of despair.

Then we will be able to celebrate on Christmas and be filled with the great joy of our coming Savior, singing with the angels, “*Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.*”



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