

A Jerusalem Voice for Justice:
an ecumenical witness for equality and a just peace in Palestine/Israel

A letter to our people and to our pastors

August 25, 2025

1. Who are we?

We are an ecumenical group of Christians in Jerusalem, including H.B. Latin Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Attallah Hanna and Emeritus Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan, members of the clergy and laity, who have been working for decades advocating for equality, justice and peace. We continue our reflections on the situation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the midst of the present horrors in Gaza and the West Bank.

Our vision is grounded in the reality that there are two peoples in this land, Israelis and Palestinians. They both have natural and historical rights to live here in security and dignity. Any political settlement that jeopardizes such a reality will fail to bring peace and reconciliation. All individuals, both Israelis and Palestinians, must be able to live in full equality, justice, and peace in Palestine/Israel.

We are active members of our community, the Church of the Holy Land, of Palestine/Israel, reflecting together in love, as one family. Our aim is to deepen our communion and proclaim the meaning and mission of our presence and witness as Christians rooted in this Land.

2. To our people

In these painful days, being an integral part of the reality that surrounds us, we walk through valleys shadowed by death, displacement, starvation and despair. A genocide is taking place in Gaza and risks spreading to other parts of Palestine too. Ethnic cleansing in Gaza, through the systematic destruction of houses, hospitals and educational institutions, advances from day to day. Similar practices are applied in the West Bank, through the violent attacks by Israeli settlers with the complicity of the Israeli army. Houses are demolished, whole villages destroyed and their inhabitants made homeless; thousands of prisoners are under administrative detention without any legal protection; people are killed and wounded, olive trees are burnt, harvests destroyed, herds of sheep and cattle killed or stolen, private property looted.

We cannot forget that all through our history, God has called us to be agents of peace, brokers of justice and ministers of reconciliation among the various ethnic and religious components of the people in this land. However, many of us have lost much, continue to struggle daily to provide for our families, and live in fear of what is to come, challenged by dramatic questions about our presence and future in this Land.

A choice to be made: to stay or not to stay?

It breaks our hearts to see families expelled or pressured to leave Palestine-Israel. For those who leave by choice, we do not criticise them for doing so, for we know the burden we all carry. We pray and bless them wherever they go. Among us—members of the Body of Christ rooted in the soil of Palestine—though, there are those who have chosen to stay, to speak out and to act. Those who stay, whether by choice or not, must collectively understand who we are and why we are staying.

To stay is to bear witness

To stay in this land is not merely a political, social or practical decision. It is a spiritual act. We stay neither because it is easy nor because it is a fatality. We stay because we have been called. Our Lord

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, walked the hills of Galilee, wept over Jerusalem, and suffered unjust death because He was faithful to his mission until the end. He did not flee suffering. He entered into it, bringing life out of death. So too, we remain, not to romanticise suffering, but to witness to the Lord's presence and power in our wounded Holy Land.

To stay is to say with our lives: this land, bruised and bleeding, is still holy. To stay is to proclaim that Palestinian life—Muslim, Christian, Druze, Samaritan, Bahai—and Jewish-Israeli life is sacred and must be protected. It is to remember that resurrection begins in the tomb, and that even now, in our collective suffering, God is with us. As the Latin Patriarch, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, said on his recent visit to Gaza, *"Christ is not absent from Gaza. He is there—crucified in the wounded, buried under rubble, and yet present in every act of mercy, every candle in the darkness, every hand extended to the suffering."* God sees and shares our sufferings and struggle, as God did in Jesus, and God loves us, each one, as a child. We are the children of the resurrection. Our presence in itself is a witness to our Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ.

We desire to continue our uninterrupted witness to the Gospel, since Pentecost, in the places where everything started. We are the living stones that animate the Holy Places, which pilgrims from the whole world come to visit in order to refresh their faith. Without our communities, these places would merely be archaeological sites or museums.

To stay is to love

Our presence is a form of resistance—not of hate, but of deep and abiding love. We love this land not as property, but as gift. We love our Muslim and Jewish neighbours not abstractly, but in solidarity and in action. To stay means to continue planting trees, raising children, dressing wounds, and welcoming the stranger. It means insisting that God's Kingdom—where the meek are lifted up and the proud brought low—cannot be obscured by bombs, starvation or walls.

To stay is to follow Christ who said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers."* But peace, as we know, is not passivity. It is the fierce labour of liberation, equality, justice, truth, and mercy. Our mission, then, is not to withdraw, but to build: homes, churches, schools, hospitals and gardens. We are called to be communities of faith that model another way—God's way—in a land thirsting for life. We do know that in this life perfect peace is utopian, nevertheless, it is through our witnessing to it here that we will enjoy it even more fully in the Kingdom of God.

To stay is to be Church

Together we constitute a living and incarnate Church in the land of the Incarnation. Since the time of Pentecost, our liturgies have been sung in times of joy and suffering, giving expression to many languages and cultures: Aramaic, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Latin, and many more. Our sacraments flow with ancient and undefeated hope. We pray today, rooted in our rich and ancient traditions, but wholly present in and faithful to our surrounding world.

Our mission is to be salt and light in the very place where Christ first said these words. Salt that heals the wounds of discrimination, occupation, genocide and ongoing trauma. Light that refuses to go out, even when the darkness is ever deeper. And even if we are reduced to a handful of people, we will intensify and strengthen our role to be salt and light.

We are called to minister to the suffering, advocate for the oppressed, speak truth to power, and live lives deeply rooted in the Gospel. We must equip our youth, strengthen our communities, and deepen our faith—not only to survive, but to live fully, even now in the midst of death and destruction. We are not alone.

Our churches were built by our ancestors on the foundations of the early Church. *"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid: that foundation is Jesus Christ"* (1Corinthians 3: 11). Now too, we will follow the example of the blessed Virgin Mary, the Apostles, the Martyrs and all the saints of this land in the first centuries, among them, Saints Elias (Elijah), George, Barbara,

Nicolas, Mar Saba and the cloud of martyrs and holy persons, with all of our ancestors, who advanced God's Kingdom in our country and throughout the whole world.

Hope beyond resignation

We are not naive. We know the powers of selfishness, greed, dispossession, evil and death that prevail in our world. But we also know the Cross—and the empty tomb. To stay in Palestine-Israel is to believe that resurrection is possible, even here and now. And we know that the way to the Resurrection is a way of Cross. Therefore, we affirm that God's promises are not erased by war, genocide or exile. We are also consoled by the awakening of so many people throughout the world manifesting solidarity with our struggle and we admire their courage as they try to change the policies set in place by world leaders who remain deaf to the cry of the starving and blind to the scenes of suffering.

So, let us say to one another: we stay because we are called, we remain because we are sent. And we live because Christ lives in us.

May the God of justice and reconciliation give us strength, courage, and hope. May we be faithful to the Gospel, to humanity, to our people and to our land. And may we, the Church in Palestine-Israel, allow Christ to work through us to end the discrimination, occupation, genocide and the suffering of all people in this land: *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

3. To our Pastors.

We love and respect our fathers and pastors. We appreciate your efforts and sacrifices in all aspects of our lives, from spiritual guidance, to community leadership, to toiling to bring assistance to our people in housing, education, health care and welfare. We recognize in these times the difficulties you face have multiplied manifold.

We thank you for your statements related to the harsh situation we are living and in defense of human and moral values. We especially rejoice when you speak with one voice and take common initiatives, like the recent visits to Gaza and Taybeh. We pray and hope that these common words and initiatives may intensify and become a constant reality in all aspects of life, proclaiming that we are one.

Nonetheless, sometimes faithful complain that some of us, church leaders, clergy and religious are too remote from the people, and their daily struggles and sufferings. Sometimes, even in parishes, the homilies of the priests are detached from the lives of the people. Those pastors who remain remote seem to be saying sometimes that our problem is not their problem. Some, by their words and actions seem to suggest that this is not their war as it has not yet touched their churches, convents and communities. This lack of solidarity is a grievous wound to our communion.

Among those holding positions of responsibility in the Church of Jerusalem, we must work together for more conscientization. Those responsible at all levels need to stay abreast of what is happening, especially with regard to the current events and the tragedies that are striking our people. Those that have come from afar with good intentions to serve in the Church of Jerusalem must be encouraged and helped to know the history and culture of this land and its peoples. Preconceived notions must give way to knowledge and truth about the conflict in Palestine/Israel so that together we can better face its challenges. This is necessary to foster a spirit not of "we" and "them" within the Church but rather of a common "we". It is a "we" that extends in ever widening circles – we Christians, we Palestinians, Muslims and Christians together, we people of this land, Palestinians and Israelis.

We are willing and at your service to assist you, our fathers and pastors, to invest even more in guiding the people, giving clearer guidelines about the Church's position on equality, justice and

peace. The Catholic Church's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is a rich treasury in this endeavor. Our people are thirsting for a teaching that helps them see how the Gospel applies to their lives, and how hope can be kept alive within their families.

We are also willing and ready to think together how the Church might propose more reflection on the political situation and the Church's stand with regard to it. This is surely necessary for all parts of the Body of Christ: bishops, clergy, religious, laity. Thus, we can all fulfill our responsibility better. These regular formation times can be attuned to the need to pray for our land and its peoples, to preach words of guidance and comfort in our homilies and counsel those in need as they face the consequences of this catastrophic situation.

Our people need pastors who fully share the life of their flock, caring for them and guiding them in daily life, willing to initiate courageous daily acts to challenge the social and political status quo that proclaims only death and destruction. This means that our pastors must manifest more and more their deep sense of compassion and strong sense of rootedness in this land and its history.

4. Walking together

This is the moment to come together as Church in new ways. It is a time for increased solidarity and selfless mutual support. As individuals we might indeed lament and feel helpless, but as Church we do have within our DNA a way to overcome crises through our shared faith. Within the Christian community, all qualifications, occupations and social classes are represented: rich and poor, healthy and sick are living side by side. How can we put together our ideas, competences and resources?

How can we develop and intensify mutual relations and support among us? How can we, according to our capacities and positions contribute in creating a more equitable and just society, promoting a just and durable peace in this land?

The task of the bishops is to inspire, guide and encourage the whole community of believers entrusted to their care, in communion with their priests and ordained ministers.

The lay faithful are invited to collaborate closely with them. They listen to them, encourage and support them, but also should not be afraid to give them advice when they think it necessary.

We are ever aware that Christians are not outsiders, not strangers, and have to assume their responsibilities in society. Through prayer, righteous lifestyle, living Christian love for all, caring for neighbor, we commit ourselves to the struggle for equality, justice and peace. Always non-violent, we will oppose oppression, occupation and discrimination, ready to work together with Muslims and Jews who share the same values and the same vision of building a just society with equal rights and duties for all inhabitants.

The situation in our land remains complex and uncertain. However, as Christians we acknowledge that it is a privilege to live in this land that is the one where our Lord Jesus Christ, lived, preached the Good News, suffered, died and rose from the dead. Here, the Good News of the Resurrection was first proclaimed and from here it spread throughout the world.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, encourages us: "*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*" (Luke 12:32). We are called in his Spirit, and strengthened by it, to walk together. This is the way of synodality, "walking the common way".

Signatories:

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