

Part Two:

Benedict's visit to a land called to be holy

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How can the Church avoid being partisan and still speak about justice and reconciliation to the people of the Holy Land? As he concludes his reflection on Pope Benedict's visit to the Holy Land, David Neuhaus SJ discusses the Pope's appeals for peace in the region and sets out the challenging position with regard to the conflict that the Church is called to adopt.

Benedict the peacemaker

During his flight to the Holy Land, the Pope addressed the possibility of a contribution to a fragile peace process in the Holy Land, particularly between warring Israelis and Palestinians:

I see [a contribution to be made on] three levels: As believers, we are convinced that prayer is a true force. It opens the world to God: We are convinced that God listens and that he can act in history. I think that if millions of people – believers – would pray, it could really be a force that could influence and contribute to the advancement of peace. Second point: We try to help in the formation of consciences. The conscience is the capacity of mankind to perceive the truth, but particular interests often block this capacity. And it is a big job to liberate from these interests, to open more to the truth, to the true values: It is a duty of the Church to help one to know the true criteria, the true values, and to liberate ourselves from particular interests. And thus, the third point, let us draw reason in as well (...) precisely because we are not a political party, perhaps too we can more easily, with the light of faith, see the true criteria, help bring an understanding of what contributes to peace and speak to reason, to support the truly reasonable positions. And this we have already done, and we want to do so now and in the future.¹

The challenge is implicit in these words: can the Church see more clearly than the warring parties because she is not a political party to the conflict?



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Throughout his visit, the Pope drew attention to his constant prayer for justice and peace. He did so not as a politician but as a man of prayer, as a pastor aware that his flock needs peace for their survival, and as a man of dialogue. At the Mass in Jerusalem, he drew attention to the vocation of Jerusalem, unrealised in the present turmoil:

Jerusalem, in fact, has always been a city whose streets echo with different languages, whose stones are trod by people of every race and tongue, whose walls are a symbol of God's provident care for the whole human family. As a microcosm of our globalised world, this City, if it is to live up to its universal vocation, must be a place which teaches universality, respect for others, dialogue and mutual understanding; a place where prejudice, ignorance and the fear which fuels them, are overcome by honesty, integrity and the pursuit of peace. There should be no place within these walls for narrowness, discrimination, violence and injustice.²

Without flinching, the Holy Father evoked over and over again the Church's vocation to build bridges rather than walls. In clear words he addressed the distressing reality of the Holy Land where walls are more evident than bridges.

One of the saddest sights for me during my visit to these lands was the wall. As I passed alongside it, I prayed for a future in which the peoples of the Holy Land can live together in peace and harmony without

the need for such instruments of security and separation, but rather respecting and trusting one another, and renouncing all forms of violence and aggression.³

The clear call for justice went hand in hand with a total rejection of violence. He pleaded constantly with both sides to open their hearts to a new spirit.

On both sides of the wall, great courage is needed if fear and mistrust is to be overcome, if the urge to retaliate for loss or injury is to be resisted. It takes magnanimity to seek reconciliation after years of fighting. Yet history has shown that peace can only come when the parties to a conflict are willing to move beyond their grievances and work together towards common goals, each taking seriously the concerns and fears of the other, striving to build an atmosphere of trust. There has to be a willingness to take bold and imaginative initiatives towards reconciliation: if each insists on prior concessions from the other, the result can only be stalemate.⁴

Walls do not last forever though, the Holy Father assured his listeners:

Although walls can easily be built, we all know that they do not last forever. They can be taken down. First, though, it is necessary to remove the walls that we build around our hearts, the barriers that we set up against our neighbours. That is why, in my parting words, I want to make a renewed plea for openness and generosity of spirit, for an end to intolerance and exclusion. No matter how intractable and deeply entrenched a conflict may appear to be, there are always grounds to hope that it can be resolved, that the patient and persevering efforts of those who work for peace and reconciliation will bear fruit in the end.⁵

In his final words, spoken from the podium at Ben Gurion Airport, the Holy Father insisted that he was a friend of both Israelis and Palestinians and he had given ample evidence of this throughout the visit. However, again he expressed the pain of all lovers of the Holy Land and all its peoples.

No friend of the Israelis and the Palestinians can fail to be saddened by the continuing tension between your two peoples. No friend can fail to weep at the suffering and loss of life that both peoples have endured over the last six decades. Allow me to make this appeal to all the people of these lands: No more bloodshed! No more fighting! No more terrorism! No more war! Instead let us break the vicious circle of violence. Let there be

lasting peace based on justice, let there be genuine reconciliation and healing. Let it be universally recognised that the State of Israel has the right to exist, and to enjoy peace and security within internationally agreed borders. Let it be likewise acknowledged that the Palestinian people have a right to a sovereign independent homeland, to live with dignity and to travel freely. Let the two-state solution become a reality, not remain a dream. And let peace spread outwards from these lands, let them serve as a 'light to the nations' (Is 42:6), bringing hope to the many other regions that are affected by conflict.⁶

What is needed in the present situation, the Holy Father explained is 'courage and imagination to pursue the challenging but indispensable path of reconciliation'.⁷ Courage to imagine a different future! Perhaps with these words Pope Benedict XVI touched on one of the greatest walls – an inner wall that limits how far we can see, how far imaginations can roam. We are blocked by seeing the other as an implacable enemy, yet Pope Benedict's moving across the walls and the barriers showed that they can come down if we could only open ourselves to imagine that possibility. Pope John Paul II had dwelt repeatedly on the necessity of pardon and Pope Benedict XVI brings to it the challenge of imagining the enemy as a friend.

An integral vision

The Pope's visit to the Holy Land helps to deepen our understanding of what we must hold together without confusion when confronting the realities of a conflict that seems intractable. The four poles of his visit – pilgrimage to the Holy Land of our Bible and of Jesus of Nazareth, pastoral visit to the Mother Church of Jerusalem, dialogic encounter with the Jewish people and with Muslims, and preaching good news of peace to Israelis and Palestinians and all the peoples of the Middle East – provide an integral vision that can inspire all those who love Jerusalem and pray for her peace. These four poles can and must be held together without confusion.

For several decades, since the exposure of the terrible events of the Shoah and the establishment of the State of Israel, Catholics have been attempting to formulate a position on Israel, Palestine and Palestinians, Jews, Judaism and Islam. Deep fissures have marked the Church in this regard as various,

often opposing, tendencies emerged. One movement was composed of the groups that saw with deep shame the role Catholics had played in promoting 'a teaching of contempt' for the Jewish people through the ages. This group is determined to push forward the dialogue with the Jewish people so that Catholics and Jews can enter a new age of reconciliation and collaboration. Often, this first group has been supported by those in the Church who study and teach the Bible. The increasing awareness that the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is incomprehensible without a profound awareness of Judaism, the history of the Jewish people and the Hebrew language, has strengthened the feeling that we have much in common with the Jewish people and that we have much to learn from them. Today it is not unusual for Catholic pastors, educators and lay leaders to travel to the land of the Bible and, through reading the Biblical text there, to become aware of the vitality and beauty of the Jewish tradition and those who practice it in Israel today. In this worldview, the Israelis are a courageous part of the Jewish people, struggling to be reborn after the traumatic and dramatic sufferings of the past. From this perspective, the Palestinians are barely on the radar screen.

However, alongside this tendency, another has emerged. Those Catholics committed to the work of justice and peace, determined to struggle against oppression and discrimination, have taken the Palestinians to their hearts. They see the Palestinians as a people struggling for their freedom, and in some cases this struggle has become paradigmatic for understanding the struggles of so many marginalised and dispossessed peoples and groups in contemporary society. In this worldview, the Israelis are a powerful, militarised and oppressive majority who dominate the last of the Third World's nations as yet to achieve national independence, through a cruel machinery of occupation. Those in the Church particularly concerned with the dialogue with Muslims also tend to see the Palestinian question as central. Muslims are often profoundly offended by Western support for Israel and they are sensitive to the mounting racism towards Muslims in many Western countries. Those Catholics in dialogue with Muslims can not ignore the passionate concern for the plight of the Palestinians. To these is added the voice of those who are focused particularly on the plight of the Christians in the Holy Land, and who blame the

present instability in the Middle East on the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Holy Father's visit has illustrated to the Church that these tendencies not only can but *must* be held together without confusion. The Church is obligated to continue down the road of dialogue and reconciliation with the Jewish people. The Church is equally obligated to speak out for justice for Palestinians. These two positions will not always be accommodated among our partners in dialogue but they represent a Catholic position that integrates the Church's fundamental commitments. Commitment to dialogue with the Jewish people cannot be synonymous with support for the political options of Zionism and the State of Israel. Commitment to justice for the Palestinian people cannot be synonymous with acquiescence in anti-Jewish sentiment or the justification of violence. Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us that the Church must become more and more a presence that not only concretely manifests justice and peace but also pardon, reconciliation, love and hope. The way that the Church speaks about the Land called to be holy and the people who live there must ultimately open up new possibilities so that a radically different future can begin to take shape in our imaginations – impregnated with the Gospel – in our discourse and ultimately in our praxis.

I conclude with the stirring words with which the Pope addressed the Church as he stood in front of the tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem

The empty tomb speaks to us of hope, the hope that does not disappoint because it is the gift of the Spirit of life (cf. Rom 5:5). This is the message that I wish to leave with you today, at the conclusion of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land. May hope rise up ever anew, by God's grace, in the hearts of all the people dwelling in these lands! May it take root in your hearts, abide in your families and communities, and inspire in each of you an ever more faithful witness to the Prince of Peace! The Church in the Holy Land, which has so often experienced the dark mystery of Golgotha, must never cease to be an intrepid herald of the luminous message of hope which this empty tomb proclaims. The Gospel reassures us that God can make all things new, that history need not be repeated, that memories can be healed, that the bitter fruits of recrimination and hostility can be overcome, and that a future of justice, peace, prosperity and cooperation can arise for

every man and woman, for the whole human family,
and in a special way for the people who dwell in this
land so dear to the heart of the Saviour.⁸

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¹ On the aeroplane, May 8, 2009

² At Mass in Jerusalem, May 12, 2009

³ At Ben Gurion Airport, May 15, 2009

⁴ At Aida Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, May 13, 2009

⁵ At farewell, Palestinian Autonomy, Bethlehem, May 13,
2009

⁶ At farewell at Ben Gurion Airport, May 15, 2009

⁷ At Aida Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, May 13, 2009

⁸ At the Holy Sepulchre, May 15, 2009