



## Crisis in the Holy Land: The Christian Exodus

*From the speech by Reverend Peter Vasko, OFM, President of the Holy Land Foundation, on February 24, 2001, Dallas CMF Conference.*

A serious crisis in the Holy Land has been occurring and it is gaining momentum: the indigenous Christian presence in the Holy Land faces the threat of extinction. In the very land where Christianity was formed, a steady stream of young Christian people (are) is departing. Today in Israel, and we include the West Bank of Gaza, there are 4.8 million of the Jewish faith, 3 million of the Moslem faith and Christians 160,000. Back in 1950, the middle of this last century, 25% of the population of the Holy Land was Christian. Today it is under 2% and going down. Bethlehem 35 years ago, the place where Our Lord Jesus was born, the population was 80% Christian and 20% Moslem. Today it is 90% Moslem and 10% Christian. In Ram Allah, the place where the Holy Family stopped, realizing that Jesus was not with them, is the Christian town north of Jerusalem. Twenty-five years ago there were 60,000 Christians living there. Today it is under 6,000 and going down. Jerusalem, the holy city of Jerusalem, in 1947 had 48,000 Christians. In 1967, there were only 28,000 Christians living there with a population of 600,000 people. Most church officials say that if nothing is done to stop this Christian exodus, that within 60 years Christianity will disappear from the very place where Christ founded His church. And all we will have will be empty religious monuments and museums but no living worshipping community.

Why are they leaving? There are many reasons but they basically fall into two categories. One is economical and the other is political. Economically speaking, the average Israeli man or woman in Israel today earns between 22 and 24 thousand dollars a year. The average Christian man or woman earns between 7 and 8 thousand dollars a year. Unemployment for the Israelis this last year was 7% and unemployment for the Christians and the other Palestinians was 60%. Seven hundred fifty thousand Palestinians, 5% of them

Christians, are living below the poverty level which is now \$700–\$800 a year. Because of the recent closures in Israel, the agricultural industry in Gaza, which makes up about 40% of the GDP, took a downward spiral. Imports are prevented from coming into the territories and exports are prevented from leaving the territories. Israel today has a GDP of one hundred billion dollars and last year Israel shipped overseas \$7 billion in high-tech products and expects \$12 billion in 2001. According to Palestinian economists, even if Israel lifts the closures and posts on the Palestinian territories that prevent free movement of goods, the peoples gains made by the economy this past year have already been wiped out. Over \$3.4 million has been lost in remittances from Palestinians working in Israel and in trade, and over \$6 million a day is being lost every day that the closure takes its toll. If it is allowed to continue, it will have major negative economic and social ramifications and will threaten the peace and security in the region.

### Aid to Israel in Billions

According to the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, the U.S. Government has given in the year 2000 over \$6.1 billion in overall foreign aid to Israel; many of you read about the \$3 billion that is given, but there is a lot more that the American taxpayer knows nothing about. Since 1949 total USA aid exceeds \$90 billion. If you break that figure down it is a cumulative figure of \$15,051 for every Israeli man, woman and child. In other words, direct U.S. taxpayer aid to Israel now amounts to \$75,260 for every Israeli family of five since that time.

But the real point is that all of the money is being given to either Israel or the Palestinian Authority and none of that money ever trickles down to the Christian Palestinians; and if they do not have any major organizations, they do not have any major resources

and they are the ones who are departing. Politically speaking, beginning with UN partition of Palestine in 1947, political violence and turmoil has ensued with each side claiming the right to this land. For the last 53 years, the Palestinians have been under siege, and since 1967 have been under occupation in spite of the United Nations' resolution 242 calling for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the 1967 conflict and the right of every state in the area to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries free from threat and acts of force. Whether they be issues of land confiscations by settlers, confiscation of Jerusalem identity cards, closures, house demolitions, freedom of movement all are part and parcel of the greater question of justice and respect for human dignity.

### Closures

One of the greatest weapons used politically by the Israeli military has been the frequent use of closing the territories, that is the West Bank in Gaza to principal Israeli cities such as Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. As a result of past closures in the West Bank and Gaza, 120,000 Palestinians—5% of them being Christians—lost their jobs and because the Israeli businesses cannot count on their work force of Palestinians, the government has brought in 120,000 Romanians, Bulgarians and Thais to replace these 120,000 Palestinian workers. During the three month conflict last year from October to December, another 100,000 Palestinians—10% this time being Christians—were turned away from their jobs in these Israeli cities and as of now are still not permitted to enter Israel proper.

### Scenario

In order to understand the concept of closures here is a scenario for your imagination. Let's say that you are from Adobe, Texas, a one-horse town. There is no industry whatsoever, there are no doctors or medical facilities whatsoever and there are no schools and for those services you have been going from Adobe to Dallas because Dallas is the big city. You have been working in Dallas for the last forty years, you get in your car and you get to the city limits of Dallas from Adobe and you are stopped by a quadrant of U.S. Army Reservists. The officer comes to the car and asks for your license and he sees that you are from Adobe, Texas. He tells you, "You have to turn around and go back." You say, "Excuse me, what is the problem?" "Well, there were some people from Adobe, Texas who murdered and maimed a dozen or so people in Dallas and you could be one of those terrorists." You look at him and say, "I've been working in Dallas for the last forty years; I'm a taxpayer and I have no criminal record; I have a

family to feed and I just want to go to work." You are rebuffed, you try several times during the week and you're still rebuffed and three weeks later you get a termination notice that you are no longer needed at your job.

How would you feel as an American citizen, as a resident of Texas that you can no longer go from Adobe to Dallas or anywhere else—how would you react to that? This is what we're talking about with the Christians and the other Palestinians. How would you feel if your mother or father was having a heart attack, or your wife or daughter was having a baby and the only hospital is in Dallas, so you rush your loved ones to Dallas, you reach the city limits and you find the same situation with the Army Reservists and they refuse to let you in. And you say this is an emergency; they need medical attention and you are not permitted and your mother or father die in the front seat of the car or your wife or daughter gives birth to the baby in the back seat of the car but because the infant needed medical attention that infant dies. How would you react if that happened to you? The same goes for education. Your children can no longer go to school because you are termed as a terrorist.

This is what is happening to the Christians and the other Palestinians in the area. Do you know that priests and nuns and ministers of the other religious sects who live in Bethlehem, which is only six miles south of Jerusalem, are still not permitted to go to Holy Week Services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during Holy Week? It says on their identification cards they are Christians and yet, they are not permitted to go, even today. We are speaking about basic universal rights; the right to work, the right for medical accessibility, the right of an education, the right of freedom of movement; rights that we all enjoy in America but not for Palestinians, both Christians and Moslems in Israel. As one Palestinian legislator recently stated how would a ban on commercial activity with the outside world; the suspension of working papers, the prevention of entry of medical emergencies, basic medicine and basic food supplies have anything to do with the fight against terrorism.

I have been in the Holy Land for the last 17 years and I can tell you that the conflict for security for the Israelis is legitimate and necessary. But what about the Palestinians? Do they have any lesser rights? Are they considered second class citizens? The principal question I have asked authorities is at what price do you punish an entire people because of ten criminals or a dozen criminals. What is missing in this entire equation is quite obvious: total disregard for human dignity, a dignity that has been given to each one of us by God no matter who we are, what nationality we are or what race we are.

## Who are the Palestinians?

When Americans read about Palestinians in the newspapers, the word Palestinian has several connotations. When you read it you may subconsciously think Arafat, terrorism, bad people, negativity—stay away from those people. In my many talks across the United States I tell the Christians that the Palestinian people are just like you and me. They are responsible, they are conscientious, they are hard-working and so are the basic Israeli people. They want peace too. Yet who gets the headlines? The Hamas terrorists who should be put away and the Jewish settlers. They get the headlines. They do not represent the people. It's a very small portion.

So the next time you read Palestinians kill Israelis, please read between the lines and realize that criminal elements of the Palestinian people are killing Israelis, not the Palestinian people. One word on the behavioral aspect of these young Moslem boys you see throwing stones at the Israeli military. It is important to remember that these young people have grown to adulthood with little opportunity to live normal lives and no hope that their circumstances will change. Twenty-five percent of those young people are under the age of 18 years of age and for many of them, life is a daily hell marked by violence, repression, humiliation, racism and hatred. To be demeaned verbally or physically abused by soldiers and settlers, to lose a child or parent to settlers' attacks, or just to be held arbitrarily for long periods of time in the hot sun at checkpoints with no significant control over any area of their life, to be powerless and to be denied all basic human rights, it fuels the fire of frustration. Frustration builds into rage, that spills over into emotional and violent outbursts. Most Palestinians have been recipients of steady doses of such traumatizing and embittering experiences. I am not condoning their behavior; I am against any violent solution—but we must understand where those young men are coming from. Palestinians and Israelis are locked in a peace security conundrum and in this situation Israelis will not be able to enjoy great peace and security until Palestinians achieve more control over their lives and their land and Palestinians will not fully realize peace and justice until Israelis fill a great sense of security.

During the time of closures of the West Bank, our Christian teachers, who reside in Bethlehem and have never really been part of any arm-struggle against the Israelis, were repeatedly denied permission to come to Jerusalem to teach in our schools. We wrote letters to the Prime Minister, this was beginning with Netanyahu and with Mr. Barak for special permits from them to move from Point A to Point B so that our educational process would not be disrupted. We never heard from the Prime Minister,

he never had the decency to acknowledge our letter from the Custodians; some 4,000 students and some 300 teachers were affected and many of our schools are only partially operating.

When it is all said and done, Israel will no doubt continue to be a land of confusion and contradiction. It took many thousands of years of animosity, revenge and hostility to harden the hearts of so many who live in the Holy Land. It could very well take an equal number of years to undo the harm. Unfortunately, it is the common people who bear the brunt of the sufferings there and whether someone is Jewish, Christian or Moslem, Israeli or Palestinian, all who live there are still fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. In reality, all are children of God and like everyone else, frightened and uncertain about the future, trying to come to grips with their loneliness and anger and yet still hopeful for something better for themselves, and more importantly for their children and their children's children.

In the meantime, the crisis of the Christian exodus continues; yes, there have been some improvements and that is what the Holy Land Foundation (140 Quincy Street, NE; Washington, D.C. 20017; call 202-269-5430 for free information) has been attempting to do. In our U.S.A., there is a tendency of individualism, which says first of all, take care of ourselves. We have pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but as Catholics and as Christians, we need to recognize that we stand "on the shoulders of those who went before us." The Holy Land, our Christian heritage, our living church in Jerusalem, our sacred sites, these are the shoulders on which we stand when it comes to our faith. If we are going to do something about the problems facing our Christians in the Holy Land, then we need to do something about protecting them, about maintaining them, about loving them, and somehow guaranteeing that they will always be available to those coming after us.

A great challenge awaits us, and we Catholics, Christians, knowing what we now know cannot sit back and watch these guardians of Christianity simply disappear. These forgotten faithful have been maintaining the Church, our Church in the Holy Land, for all these 2,000 years, and we cannot let them disappear. The holy sites of Christianity cannot exist in isolation but need a living and worshipping community to validate them and support them. My question to you is: are you willing to carry on our faith? Will you be their voice; will you be their platform and will you be their lobby—the lobby for preserving Christ's kingdom in the Holy Land? If you are, then you will be responding to the religious call first revealed to Abraham, our Father in faith, and that is to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right. Thank you very much for your attention and God Bless You.

## CMF Conference in 2001



**DALLAS, TX**—The 17th annual CMF Dallas Conference was held on February 24 with a sell-out crowd of 680 persons. CMF of Texas led by Susan and Tom Stanzel, in cooperation with CMF of St. Louis, presented a most interesting, attractive and spiritually stimulating program.

The opening Rosary through the concluding Mass with the beautiful Dallas U. Collegium Cantorum Choir featured four superb speakers: **Fr. Peter Vasko** on the Holy Land; **Fr. George Rutler** on our victim culture; **Robert Royal** on Catholic Martyrs of the 20th Century; **Carlos E. Fonts** on the survival of Cuba under Castro. Excellent Tapes are available from CMF. The **Freedom Award** was given to Board Member Daniel K. Hennessy; the **Motherhood Award** was given to Mrs. Mary Ann N. Collins.

The smooth success of the Conference is due to dedication, hard work and constant reliance upon prayer and sacrifice. Susan and Tom Stanzel and their loyal Committee Members exemplify these notable attributes and CMF is exceedingly grateful. May God bless each Committee Member and each attendee of the Conference.



**Top:** Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM; Nancy Cheney; Bishop Rene Gracida; Eleanor Schlafly and Susan Stanzel. **Bottom, left:** Eleanor Schlafly, Daniel K. Hennessy, Chrm. Susan Stanzel. **Bottom, right:** Awardee Mary Ann N. Collins, Chrm. Susan Stanzel.

## News & Notes

**THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IS A MOTHER**—Cardinal Mindszenty's respect for Mothers was deep and abiding. We have printed below the Cardinal's quote; it is in blue ink on a white card 5½ x 3."

Order a supply of cards with the beautiful pro-life message. Insert with your letters, bills; give out at church and meetings.

Cost including postage:

20 cards	\$2.00
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100 cards	\$7.00
500 cards	\$32.50
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The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body...The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces with mothers in performing this act of creation...What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?  
—Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty

### 2 TIMOTHY 4:18

*"May the Lord rescue us from every evil threat and bring us safe to his heavenly kingdom."*

## Mindszenty Report Reprints

**EXCERPTS FROM THE FBI AFFIDAVIT IN THE SPY CASE AGAINST ROBERT PHILIP HANSSEN**—Reprinted from the *New York Times* of February 22, 2001. Ask for 3/01

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