

**Justice and Peace Commission  
of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land**

**A Call for a Courageous Change**

*“A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15).*

***A reality of violence and mourning***

Israel and Palestine are echoing with the cry of mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, loved ones of the young people who have fallen victim to the latest round in the cycle of violence that plagues this land. Some of their faces are well known because the media have covered in detail their lives, interviewing their parents, bringing them alive in our imaginations, whereas others – by far more numerous – are mere statistics, nameless and faceless. The selective coverage, mourning and memory are themselves part of the cycle of violence.

We offer our sincere condolences to all those in mourning, Israelis and Palestinians. We must continue to pray that those that have fallen recently will be the last to die violent deaths in this escalation of hatred and vengeance.

***A language that breeds violence***

*“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. (...) With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:5-6. 9).*

Our hope to bring the cycle of violence to an end is shattered by the irresponsible language of collective punishment and revenge that breeds violence and suffocates the emergence of any alternative. Many in positions of power and political leadership remain entrenched. Not only are they unwilling to enter into any real and meaningful process of dialogue but also pour oil on the fire with words and acts that nurture the conflict.

The violent language of the street in Israel that calls for vengeance is fed by the attitudes and expressions of a leadership that continues to foster a discriminatory discourse promoting exclusive rights of one group and the occupation with all of its disastrous consequences. Settlements are built, lands are confiscated, families are separated, loved ones are arrested and even assassinated. The occupation leadership seems to believe that the occupation can be victorious by crushing the will of the people for freedom and dignity. They seem to believe that their determination will ultimately silence opposition and transform wrong into right.

The violent language of the Palestinian street that calls for vengeance is fed by the attitudes and expressions of those who have despaired of any hope to reach a just solution to the conflict through negotiations. Those who seek to build a totalitarian, monolithic society, in which there is no room for any difference or diversity, gain popular support, exploiting this situation of hopelessness. To these we also say: Violence as a response to violence breeds only more violence.

***Breaking out of the cycle of violence***

At the invocation for peace in Israel and Palestine, held in the Vatican on June 8, 2014, Pope Francis said: *“Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare. It calls for the courage to say yes to encounter and no to conflict: yes to dialogue and no to violence; yes to negotiations and no to hostilities; yes to respect for agreements and no to acts of provocation; yes to sincerity and no to duplicity. All of this takes courage, it takes strength and tenacity”*.

We need to recognize that the kidnapping and cold blooded murder of the three Israeli youth and the brutal vengeance killing of the Palestinian youth are products of the injustice and of the hatred that the occupation fosters in the hearts of those prone to such deeds. These deaths are in no way justifiable and we mourn with those who mourn the waste of these young lives. Using the death of the three Israelis to exact collective punishment on the Palestinian people as a whole and on its legitimate desire to be free is a tragic exploitation of tragedy and promotes more violence and hatred.

At the same time, we need to recognize that resistance to occupation cannot be equated with terrorism. Resistance to occupation is a legitimate right, terrorism is part of the problem. Again we say to one and all: Violence as a response to violence breeds only more violence.

The present situation in Gaza is an illustration of the never-ending cycle of violence in the absence of a vision for an alternative future. Breaking out of the cycle of violence is the duty of all, oppressors and oppressed, victims and victimizers. In order to commit themselves to this aim, all must recognize in the other a brother or sister to be loved and cherished rather than an enemy to be hated and eliminated.

### ***Need for radical change***

We need radical change. Israelis and Palestinians together need to shake off the negative attitudes of mutual mistrust and hatred. We are called to educate the younger generation in a new spirit that challenges the existing mentalities of oppression and discrimination. We need to shake off any leadership that feeds on the cycle of violence. We must find and support leaders who are determined to work for justice and peace, recognizing that God has planted here three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and two peoples: Palestinian and Israeli. We must find leaders who are clear-sighted and courageous enough to face the urgency of the present situation and to take the difficult decisions that are needed, leaders who, if necessary, are ready to sacrifice their political careers for the sake of a just and lasting peace. Such leaders have the vocation to be healers, peace makers, seekers of justice and visionaries of the alternatives to the cycle of violence.

We remember the recent visit of Pope Francis to our region and his incessant call for justice and peace. In his meeting with the Palestinian leadership he said: *“In expressing my closeness to those who suffer most from this conflict, I wish to state my heartfelt conviction that the time has come to put an end to this situation which has become increasingly unacceptable. For the good of all, there is a need to intensify efforts and initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for a stable peace based on justice, on the recognition of the rights of every individual, and on mutual security. The time has come for everyone to find the courage to be generous and creative in the service of the common good”* (May 25, 2014). Likewise, in his meeting with the Israeli leadership, he said *“Here I renew my plea that all parties avoid initiatives and actions which contradict their stated determination to reach a true agreement and that they tirelessly work for peace, with decisiveness and tenacity. There is likewise need for a firm rejection of all that is opposed to the cultivation of peace and respectful relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims”* (May 26, 2014).

### ***Role of religious leaders***

Our role, as religious leaders, is to speak a prophetic language that reveals the alternatives beyond the cycle of hatred and violence. This language refuses to attribute the status of enemy to any of God's children; it is a language that opens up the possibility of seeing each one as brother or sister. Pope Francis at the invocation for peace cried out: "*We have heard a summons, and we must respond. It is the summons to break the spiral of hatred and violence, and to break it by one word alone: the word "brother". But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father.*"

Religious leaders are invited to use language responsibly so that it becomes a tool to transform the world from a Wilderness of darkness and death into a flourishing garden of life.

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"*

(Matthew 5:6-9).

Jerusalem, 8 July 2014