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“A Holy Land Context for *Nostra Aetate*”

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Together with Catholics around the world, the Catholic Church of the Holy Land has celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). Christians in the Holy Land had seen up close the difference the Declaration has had in shaping papal visits to the Holy Land. In 1964, Pope Paul VI, who would one year later ratify *Nostra Aetate*, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. His major meeting was with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Constantinople, Benedictos and Athenagoras. However, when Pope John Paul II visited the Holy Land in 2000, he sought out not only Israeli and Palestinian political leaders and other Christian leaders but also went to visit the Chief Rabbis and the Mufti of Jerusalem and made a peace pilgrimage to both the *Haram al-Sharif* (the area of the main mosques of Jerusalem) and the Western Wall. Perhaps even more meaningful for many Israelis and Palestinians, the Pope visited the Deheisheh refugee camp (home to Palestinian refugees from the 1948 War) and *Yad VaShem* (the Israeli Holocaust memorial), courageously stepping out of the religious arena to meet Jews and Palestinians in their own histories too.

As with all teaching formulated at the level of the Universal Church, the Local Church must seek ways to put the decisions of the Church into practice by contextualizing them within the specific circumstances of its local reality. In 1995, the Catholic Churches of the Holy Land, comprising not only the Roman Catholic Church but also the Oriental Churches (Greek, Maronite, Armenian, Syrian and Chaldean), began a synod that would last five years and lead to the promulgation of sixteen documents on all aspects of the life of the Church, which together constitute a long-term General Pastoral Plan (GPP) for the life of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land. Thirty years after the Second Vatican Council, the Local Church in Jerusalem reflected on

the profound changes that had affected both Church and society in the Holy Land in the interim. The introduction to the published collection of Synod documents states: “The variety of changes poses many challenges to the Church and, from the grassroots to the summit; it motivates her to ask new and urgent questions in a manner unknown in the past.”¹

What is of particular interest here is the thirteenth Synod document entitled “Relations with Believers of Other Religions,” which is appended to this article. It presents a contextualized teaching based on *Nostra Aetate* for the Local Church in the various Catholic dioceses in the countries of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Cyprus. A glance at the footnotes will show how important the various statements of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East were in the formulation of this local document.² The Synod document also builds on the pastoral letters of Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, who, since his consecration in January 1988, has constantly addressed the issues of justice and peace, dialogue and reconciliation in the Holy Land.³

¹ Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, *The General Pastoral Plan*, (Jerusalem, 2001), 10.

² The Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East includes all the Patriarchs of the Eastern rite churches in the Middle East (Greek, Maronite, Syrian, Armenian, Chaldean and Coptic) as well as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. This representative body of Arab Catholics in the Middle East regularly publishes important guidelines for the Christian Arab faithful in the region.

³ Here we must mention Sabbah’s 1993 pastoral letter, *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* that contextualized teachings derived particularly from *Dei Verbum* and *Nostra Aetate*. This letter sought to help the faithful in the Holy Land read their Bibles, particularly the Old Testament, within the difficult political situation.

The openness represented by *Nostra Aetate* is echoed in the Synod document on interreligious dialogue. If anything, the foundation for this openness is even more theologically grounded than at Vatican II since it draws on the theological developments since the Council, especially during the epoch of Pope John Paul II. The document presents a Trinitarian dialogic model as the basis of interreligious dialogue. Quoting extensively from a message of the Patriarchs of the East, *The Christian Presence in the East* (1992), the document states: "Our countries comprise the land of this dialogue *par excellence*, a land that 'makes dialogue their basic vocation and greatest challenge'" (147). The Synod took place at a time when optimism reigned in the area since it seemed that a process of political dialogue had begun between Palestinians and Israelis. The Synod document is composed of four major parts: an introduction, the dialogue with Muslims, the dialogue with Jews, and a conclusion on the vocation of Jerusalem as city of dialogue and reconciliation. We would like to stress that the document contains both echoes and adaptations of *Nostra Aetate*.

Whereas *Nostra Aetate* adopted a language that was general, the Synod document grounds interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land and in the city of Jerusalem as exemplary places of dialogue. With great emphasis, the document suggests: "In our Holy Land, this dialogue includes members of the three major religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) as well as members of other denominations (Druze, Samaritans, Bahai, etc.) We hope that our Holy Land can become a unique and distinguished place of coming together and of love among the religions, in the service of our societies and the universal service of humanity. Everyone expects this corner of the world to be a source of inspiration because of its spiritual and social grandeur, despite all the obstacles which oppose this dialogue" (147).

The introductory part of the Synod document discreetly underlines a fundamental difference in perspective between Holy Land Christians and the heart of the Universal Church in Rome. "Even though Christians are few in number in their societies, this should not be a barrier to dialogue but rather a call to witness to the magnanimous values of the Gospel" (148). In the context of the Second Vatican Council, it is the voice of a Christian faith that has been a dominant and majority force in Europe through long centuries of history that is heard. However, in the Holy Land, the Christians are a small group within a society that is predominantly non-Christian (Muslim or Jewish). The fact of being few in number cannot be ignored in reading the document. Another Synod document, "The Christian in Public Life," understands this minority status as "a vocation, a witness and a mission" (163). Christians, though few in number, are called to liberate themselves from any kind of "minority complex" that would shut themselves off from society and instead to imitate the earliest Christian communities that "were a small and humble minority yet characterized by the vitality of the new human person in their enthusiasm and joy" (163).

The Synod speaks predominantly for Christians who are Arabs and who have lived for centuries within an Islamic culture. Whereas *Nostra Aetate* presents a progression from the religions furthest from European culture and theological concerns (Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions to Islam to Judaism), the Synod text contains two main sections, the first dedicated to Muslims and the second dedicated to Jews. The Christian Arab and the Muslim Arab, whatever their religious differences might be, live in one society, speak one language and share one culture. Thus, dialogue with Muslims is a priority for the Local Church in a way that is not self-evident elsewhere. In some parts of the Holy Land dioceses, it is only the dialogue with Muslims that happens since, for example, there are no Jews in Jordan and Gaza. Whereas *Nostra Aetate* began its discussion of relations with

Muslims by noting common religious principles, the Synod text begins with other important levels of commonality: historical experience, social neighborliness, co-existence and civil identity, and only lastly mentions common religious principles. In very realistic terms (in contrast to the rather abstract formulations of *Nostra Aetate*), the Synod document describes the positive and negative aspects of contemporary Christian-Muslim co-existence, laying out a program for the development of this co-existence. This program focuses on the deepening of personal relations, the promotion of mutual respect, the establishment of organizations for dialogue and encounter, the formulation of educational curricula that promote co-existence, the formation of clergy, and a joint struggle against all kinds of discrimination in civil society.

The ongoing dialogue with Muslims continues at every level of Christian life in the Holy Land and is founded not only on the fact that Christians and Muslims form one national, civic, cultural and linguistic community but on the teaching of respect derived from *Nostra Aetate*. A recent letter of the Latin Patriarch expressed it in these terms:

In daily life, even though relations between Christians and Muslims are generally good, we are fully aware that there are certain difficulties and challenges that must be confronted. These include mutual ignorance, an authority vacuum that produces insecurity, discrimination, and that trend towards Islamization among certain political movements, which endangers not only Christians but also many Muslims who desire an open society. When Islamization constitutes an infringement on the liberty of the Christian, we must insist that our identity and our religious liberty be respected. This complexity is sometimes exploited for the political end of dividing the society. However, through dialogue and other diverse initiatives, Christians and Muslims are called to collaborate with one another in the construction of a

common society, founded on principles of mutual respect and responsibilities."⁴

The Synod document dedicates a long section to the relationship of local Christians with Jews. Here, too, the particular context of local Christians as contrasted with the Universal Church must inform any reading of this section. The Local Church does not reflect on this dialogue from the same starting point as its European counterparts, strongly influenced as they are by the history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Christians in the Holy Land see themselves as free of the taints of antisemitic practice, policy and the responsibility for the fate of European Jewry. Not only are Christians few in number in the Holy Land, but Christians live as a minority face to face with a Jewish majority (those in Israel), under Israeli military occupation (those in the West Bank) or confronting a regional economic and military power (those in Jordan and Gaza). This is an absolutely unique historical situation. Nowhere else in the world do Christians experience directly the sovereignty and power of a Jewish polity and never in history have Christians experienced Jewish sovereignty and power, these only having been reestablished in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel. This unique situation must inform dialogue that takes place in this land between local Christians and Jews, predominantly in Israel. For many of the Holy Land faithful, unfortunately, the Jew is often first and foremost a policeman, a soldier or a settler.

The Synod document makes reference to another complexity of the Local Church that informs the dialogue with the Jewish people: the existence within the Church of Jerusalem of a group of Catholic Christians who are of

⁴ Patriarch Michel Sabbah and the Theological Commission, *Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 2003). This document is reproduced in the appendix to this article.

Jewish origin.⁵ The declared perspective of the document is one of unity among Christians despite the diversity of cultural, social and political origins and milieus. Furthermore, the predominantly Arab language Churches of Jerusalem are challenged by the Synod document “to preserve open bridges of communication (with)... this community in order to exchange experiences so that we can learn from one another” (156). Likewise, within the Church of Jerusalem are many groups and individuals who are from Europe and North America and share a more Western perspective on the dialogue with the Jewish people.

Despite the situation of tension and violence that exists between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, the Synod text takes positive steps to implement the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*, and even advance beyond some of the perspectives of the Conciliar document:

1. The common bases of Jews and Christians are fully recognized, whether biblical (the Old Testament), theological or historical. Rooting the historical reflection in the regional reality, the document recalls that “in our countries, Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together in fruitful social and cultural interaction, this being evident in the clear traces we find of this interaction in Arab civilization” (153).⁶

⁵ In 2003, the vicar of this group of Hebrew-speaking Catholics, Rev. Jean-Baptiste Gourion, OSB was named a bishop, auxiliary to Patriarch Michel Sabbah. Sadly, he died in 2005.

⁶ These traces include the contribution of prominent Jewish figures within Arab culture whether in the medieval period (e.g., Saad bin Yusuf al-Fayoumi known as Saadia Gaon, great biblical commentator and translator into Arabic) or in modern times (e.g., the accomplished Jewish Egyptian singer Leyla Mourad and the Jewish Moroccan fighter for democracy Abraham Serfaty).

2. Even more than *Nostra Aetate*, and drawing on the developments in Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the intervening years, the Synod document recognizes that “the Jewish other is a vibrant reality which we cannot forget or ignore” (153). Christians are invited to learn about “Judaism as lived by Jews today and as believed by them within the framework of Jewish history and the context of its reality in the Holy Land today” (155). This is in marked contrast to *Nostra Aetate*, which makes no reference to Judaism as a post-New Testament dynamic religious and spiritual reality, but is clearly in accord with the developments of later documents like those of the French bishops in 1973, the United States bishops in 1975, and the guidelines published by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1985.
3. The Synod text proposes a practical relationship with Jews based upon a common search for truth, peace and justice. Whereas *Nostra Aetate* cited “biblical and theological studies” as a main domain for collaboration, local Christians in the Holy Land look to “collaboration with movements for justice and peace within Jewish society” and to a common struggle against discrimination. Although other documents after *Nostra Aetate* underline this common front too, here again the context of the local Christians explains the difference in emphases, delineating two perspectives, one from Europe and one from Jerusalem. However, the Synod document does not ignore possible collaboration between academics on both sides on common themes, “leading to co-operation in scientific research on the Bible, history, theology, etc. in addition to sincere openness about the current situation” (156).

In the section on the Jews, the Synod document is permeated with the political reality of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, a reality that is the context for Jewish-Catholic relations in the Holy Land until a new age of peace dawns. Therefore, the document cannot ignore the difficulties in the relationship between the two parties to the dialogue. First and foremost, it cites the political situation in the country, a situation that has sadly deteriorated since the time the document was formulated. Christians and Muslims both face “exile and forced dispersion, confiscation of land and civil discrimination as well as the violation of legitimate human rights” (154). Any positive relationship must take its point of departure from these conditions “confronting them honestly and frankly” (155). The document proposes a complex and balanced view of the difficulties, including the following elements:

1. In accounting for the difference in the mutual regard of Jews and Christians, the document emphasizes that both groups are wounded by their respective histories. On the one hand, the document recognizes the traumatic effects of the Shoah but reminds readers that “the people of our countries were not party to this” (154). On the other hand, the document points to the painful experiences that Christians and Muslims went through in the 1948 Nakbah (a term meaning “calamity” and referring to the uprooting of Palestinians from their homes) and the 1967 occupation.
2. The Synod document also points to the differences that exist between Jews and Christians when it comes to the development of their religious identities, practices, and interpretation of the Bible. The Christian Patristic and the Jewish Rabbinic traditions of biblical interpretation are explicitly named. Here, too, the Synod document is part of a growing

awareness in Catholic documents on the dialogue with Jews that these very real differences cannot be ignored.⁷ However, the differences must not lead to the distortion of the belief of the other through ignorance.

3. Finally, and of great significance, the Synod document places the dialogue with the Jews within a framework of a larger dialogue that includes Muslims. “Relationship cannot be divided up; relationship in our countries being tripartite, among Muslims, Jews and Christians” (157). For local Christians, the dialogue with Jews cannot overlook the Muslim partner to the construction of a better society, offering our children a reality of justice and peace, reconciliation and pardon.

Christians in the Holy Land live a different dimension of the dialogue as a Christian minority among Jewish and Muslim majorities. They believe that their experience has something to add to the dialogue that is promoted by the universal Catholic Church. According to Holy Land Christians, all Christians should be aware of the political implications of certain positions in the dialogue. For most of the Holy Land Christian faithful, the creation of the State of Israel represents less “the return of the Jewish people to their land” than the catastrophic exile of the Palestinian people from their land. It is important, within the dialogue, to discern clearly between biblical and contemporary political circumstances. According to many Christians in the Holy Land, the modern State of Israel is a political reality and should be treated as such. The Vatican Commission for

⁷ See in particular the Pontifical Biblical Commission document of 2001, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, §22 which explicitly marks this difference with regard to Jewish and Christian readings of the Old Testament.

Religious Relations with the Jews forcefully stated this in 1985: "The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious but in their reference to the common principles of international law."⁸ Furthermore, linking the modern State of Israel with the biblical Israel (as some Western Christian groups insist on doing) makes it even more difficult for the Christians in the Holy Land to read the Old Testament because it would seem to involve a denial of their rights as Palestinians. How can they read the Old Testament when it is exploited by some Jews and some Christians as the very justification for occupation and the substitution of one people by another in a land that both peoples regard as their own?

In conclusion, the Local Catholic Church in the Holy Land has sought to implement an ongoing dialogue with Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Muslims. The present political situation, especially the continued Israeli dominance of the Palestinian Territories, remains the biggest obstacle to the development of Jewish-Christian dialogue. However, Catholic religious leaders do have contacts with the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and meet in various forums. Monthly meetings between local Israeli Jewish leading figures and the Patriarch and a commission of local Christians have led to lively encounters that are true learning experiences. One such encounter celebrated *Nostra Aetate* in June 2005 in the Jerusalem Latin Patriarchate. Patriarch Sabbah has visited a local synagogue and the rabbi of the synagogue has become a regular guest at the Patriarchate, invited in 2004 to address one of the monthly meetings of diocesan clergy. These events might seem routine in the Church at large today, but in the Holy Land, torn apart by violence, these are seeds of hope in an otherwise bleak situation. Courses in

Judaism and Jewish history are regularly taught in the Catholic diocesan seminary and the Arab language Catholic Bethlehem University. Groups of students from local Catholic institutions meet with Jewish students. Contacts continue to be established in order to help all people of good will in the Holy Land work together for justice and peace. One great obstacle is that Christians from the Palestinian territories do not have freedom of movement to come and go in Israel and Israelis are not permitted to enter the Palestinian Territories, making meetings almost impossible.

Despite the difficulties, the commitment to dialogue is fundamental. In the words of a recent letter of Patriarch Sabbah on the situation of the Local Church:

We are deeply conscious of the vocation of the Church of Jerusalem to be a Christian presence in the midst of society, be it Muslim Arab or Jewish Israeli. We believe that we are called to be leaven, contributing to the positive resolution of the crises that we are passing through. We are a voice from within our societies whose history, language and culture we share. We seek to be a presence that promotes reconciliation, helping all peoples towards a dialogue that promotes understanding and that will ultimately lead to peace in this Land."⁹

Two of the texts discussed in this article, "Relations with Believers of Other Religions" and "Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land" now follow in two appendices.

⁸ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, §25.

⁹ Sabbah, *Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land*.

Appendix 1

“Relations with Believers of Other Religions”

Chapter 13 of *The General Pastoral Plan, Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 2001).

The Reality of Pluralism and Its Challenges

Our society is characterized by great diversity and pluralism on different levels, including on the level of religious pluralism.¹⁰ Religious sentiment is profoundly rooted in our oriental society, and it plays an important, one might even say essential, role in social relations. Religious pluralism leads to certain attitudes and behaviours, *some negative and some positive*. The *positive attitudes* derive from authentic religious and social values which characterise our society, like respect for the other, be they guest, neighbour or stranger, and phenomena associated with this: hospitality, generosity, protection, compassion, etc. The *negative attitudes*, conditioned by diverse conscious or unconscious factors, should be analysed in order to defuse their destructive mechanisms and reactions expressed in everyday behaviour. These factors, which have left their negative marks on the psyche, are *historical* (wars, unrest ...), *psychological* (prejudices, labelling, projections, generalisations, fanaticism, denominational intolerance, etc), *social* (inherited ideas which transmit images of the religious other), *educational* (negative ideas concerning the religious other) and *religious* (differences in religious belief and practice). This all leads to negative attitudes and hostility which contradict relational principles and common sense,

¹⁰See *The Christian Presence in the East*, n.46.

making relationship with the religious other fraught with tension and torment. Thus our Churches are invited to reflect, realistically and creatively, on religious pluralism and its repercussions from the vantage point of their evangelical faith identity. They must attempt to formulate principles for a coexistence which is “more positive and fruitfully interactive.”¹¹

A Church of Dialogue

At the Second Vatican Council, “the Church defined itself as a Church of dialogue deriving from its very identity, vocation and mission.”¹² Pope John Paul II has said that dialogue is the new name of love. The *East* is the “land of dialogue between God and humanity through history and the economy of salvation. This dialogue reached its summit in Christ... for in him humanity was elevated to its Creator, and God drew close to His human children in a permanent dialogue which is an echo of the eternal dialogue which goes on within the Holy Trinity, among the Three Persons. God dialogued with humanity in Jesus Christ in order to enable humanity from that moment on to dialogue with itself.”¹³ Our *countries* comprise the land of this dialogue *par excellence*, a land that “makes dialogue their basic vocation and greatest challenge.”¹⁴ In the midst of this, the vocation of our Churches “is a vocation to dialogue before all else, so that they might be a living sign of the unity of the human family in a world torn by divisions. Religions are called upon to take a positive role in the solution of human problems instead of

¹¹ The fifth of the folders of the Synod, *Our relationship with others*, p. 9 and in general terms pp. 5, 8-10.

¹² *The Christian Presence in the East*, n. 46; also *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, § 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, §45; see also Jn 11:50-52 and Eph 2:11-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §46.

being a source of internecine strife and killing among the members of the one human family and in the sole homeland".¹⁵

Dialogue among Religions

In some parts of the world, religion has become an incentive for divisions and strife and this makes dialogue among religions all the more necessary and urgent so as to find favour with God and to serve humanity and human society. This dialogue does not mean enticing others to change their religion, but rather it means the coming together of the religions for the good of humanity, witnessing together, in any way possible, to human and spiritual values in the face of moral disintegration and the violation of the sanctity of the human being, whoever he or she might be. Thus the different religions can be a way to peace, to which all people aspire, rather than being a factor of dissension and dispute. In our Holy Land, this dialogue includes members of the three religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) as well as members of other denominations (Druze, Samaritans, Bahais, etc). We hope that our Holy Land can become a unique and distinguishing place of coming together and of love among the religions, in the service of our societies and the universal service of humanity. Everyone expects this corner of the world to be a source of inspiration because of its spiritual and social grandeur despite all the obstacles which oppose this dialogue.

¹⁵ Ibid., §46.

The Spirituality of Dialogue

"Dialogue is, before all else, a spiritual attitude in which a person stands before the Lord in dialogue, thus elevating soul, purifying heart and being, and this impacts on dialogue both with self and with others, be they individuals or groups. Dialogue is a spirituality which transports us from exclusion to comprehension, from refusal to acceptance, from labelling to understanding, from defamation to respect, from condemnation to compassion, from enmity to intimacy, from competition to integration, from dissent to encounter, from dispute to fraternity."¹⁶ There is no doubt that "fanaticism – in all its forms – in the name of God, religion, nationalism, religious denomination, land, race, language or in the name of cultural or social belonging, is the primary enemy of dialogue."¹⁷ Dialogue requires that each side be aware of its belief and faith and steeped in them, for the person who is ignorant is unable to enter into a worthy relationship with another. Even though Christians are few in number in their societies, this should not be a barrier to dialogue but rather a call to witness to the magnanimous values of the Gospel.

1. Our Relationship with Muslims

The Foundations of Our Relationship with Muslims

Our relationship with Muslims has its own particularity which cannot be ignored. This particularity is based upon:

- *Historical experience*: From earliest times down to the present, Christians in our countries, and in the East in general, have lived a common historical experience with their Muslim brothers and sisters, composed, like all

¹⁶ Ibid., §47.

¹⁷ Ibid.

historical experiences, of moments of light and darkness. It has been characterised by cultural collaboration and daily coexistence in all fields of life and this led to the crystallisation of an Arab civilisation at the pinnacle of its brilliance, “each on (Muslim and Christian) preserving their religious authenticity and the particularity of their traditions.”¹⁸ This is what makes “our relationship with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and with Islam a basic and characteristic dimension of the identity of our Churches within the Universal Church.”¹⁹ This historical experience is a reference point for us all, a necessary point of departure when seeking to overcome difficulties which might arise in our midst from time to time.

- *Social neighborliness*: This coexistence materializes in social integration at all levels: at home, in school and university, in work places, in associations and clubs, in celebrations and tragedies, in the many occasions of everyday social life. Our mutual relationship is not illusory, built on an imagined person, but rather concrete and real, penetrating the fiber of our social lives. It is relationship of one real person with another, with all the real potentialities and difficulties involved. This experience is a fruitful everyday fact, and at the same time (naturally), problems sometimes arise that work against this kind of neighborliness. However, these problems must be dealt with in reference to the solid and profound foundations of our long experience together.
- *Coexistence*: This historical experience is encompassed within the form of co-existence which is “a fundamental dimension of our Christian life in this precious region of

the world.”²⁰ This is what led the Catholic Patriarchs of the East to stress that “our dialogue is a dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters before anything else. The experience of coexistence we have shared for long centuries constitutes a basic experience from which there can be no pulling back, it is part of God’s will for us and for them.”²¹

- *Civic identity*: Muslims and Christians in our countries are brought together through their “belonging to one homeland and being connected by one destiny.”²² Christians and Muslims have shared this common civic identity in times of joy and times of adversity, they have suffered together, they have struggled side by side, and they share, today, the same aspirations and hopes for a better future for our countries. Civic identity strengthened the unique social identity, built upon a unity of language, culture, civilisation, history and destiny, far from the spirit of denomination and hegemony by one side over the other. Christians are called to root themselves authentically in their societies and not to isolate themselves or to feel alien.
- *Common religious principles*: Despite the fundamental differences between the two religions, they do converge when it comes to certain common principles. The Second Vatican council listed these common faith denominators: the worship of one God, Creator of heaven and earth, the

¹⁸ *Together before God: Coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the Arab World*, §10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *The Christian Presence in the East*, §48.

²² *Together before God*, §21.

prophetic status of Christ, honoring the Virgin Mary, eternal life, etc.²³

The Purpose of Our Relationship with Muslims

Our relationship with Muslims has as its purpose the development of a form of authentic, honest and active coexistence, deriving from our faith and evangelical identity and from our social reality, with all its potentialities, difficulties and challenges. The form coexistence takes must take into consideration both the positive and negative elements in our long heritage of coexistence. Likewise, factors and elements of the present as well as aspirations for the future must be taken into consideration. Any historical experience, like the one concerning us here, loses its relevance if it does not relate to contemporary conditions that we are experiencing together. The relationship between Muslims and Christians in our countries “is an experience which must preserve its vitality in order to purify, deepen and root itself in our cultural existence, renewing and making itself compatible with ever-changing present conditions. There is no doubt that coexistence is one of the most important issues facing our countries. Whether we enjoy the riches of our homeland or are deprived of them depends on the success of this endeavour.”²⁴ This requires constant positive steps forward on both sides in order to nurture coexistence within the framework of civil society.

Difficulties

However, like with any historic experience, the vast and manifold possibilities resulting from our relationship with Muslims are also linked to difficulties on both sides. These

²³ Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, §3.

²⁴ *Together before God*, §14.

difficulties originate from diverse factors, among them: political considerations, psychological, social and economic conditions, religious and denominational fanaticism and strife, etc.²⁵ Complete lack of mutual knowledge on both sides plays a negative role in these relations. This leads to projections and misunderstandings, a lack of realistic appreciation of what goes on in the mind of the religious other, paralysis in dealing with issues realistically, honestly and in a spirit of constructive self criticism, as well as a paralysis in accepting the other who is religiously different. Taking refuge in texts is not sufficient in the attempt to firmly establish an atmosphere of coexistence. It is imperative that we also seek out what is going on within the psyche so as to understand negative, destructive and hostile attitudes. We are all constantly called to purify the language of religious discourse and free it from the prejudices transmitted through the channels of religious education (in the home, the church, the mosque, the school, etc). We are called to evaluate the methods and contents of our school syllabuses and of our civic education so that they strengthen the social fibre in spite of differences in belief. The development of any form of coexistence depends on wisdom, courage, spiritual and cultural boldness in confronting difficulties honestly, without pretence or hypocrisy and without evasion. For us, believers in Christ, the spirit of Christ and his Gospel remain the basic reference point.

Modes of developing coexistence

We can develop forms of coexistence in *various ways*:

- *Personal relations*: The fact that the members of the two religions mix with one another in all spheres of life is an invitation to construct relationships of friendship and mutual

²⁵ See *Together before God*, §13

appreciation, respecting the particularity of the other. This “personal, fraternal and direct encounter” is what “allows the two sides to discover each other without ready made labels and prejudices. Our Arab civilization is a civilization of ‘the face’ (direct interpersonal relationship), and the face of the other cannot be discovered without friendly encounter, honest conversation and direct discussion. Only then, psychological and social barriers fall, barriers which have impeded knowledge and recognition of the others. Each one must understand the other as he or she really is and as they understand themselves and wish to be understood.”²⁶ Personal relationship puts an end to mutual fear which otherwise leads to estrangement or even to violence, and allows for social reality at this point in the life of our society.

- *Mutual respect:* Sketching healthy guidelines, based on mutual respect at the heart of rich diversity, is the best guarantee for serious and responsible dialogue. “The Muslim must respect the Christian as a Christian and the Christian must respect the Muslim as a Muslim.”²⁷ The Catholic Patriarchs of the East call on the Muslims “to consider the Christians as an inseparable component of the life of society, Christians being full members of civic society with regard to rights and duties.”²⁸ Likewise, they call on Christians to “rid themselves of certain negative social and psychological attitudes which they have inherited from history.”²⁹ Mutual respect leads to the acceptance of the other without giving up one’s own truth and identity.

²⁶ Ibid., §24.

²⁷ Ibid., §25.

²⁸ Ibid., §15.

²⁹ Ibid.

- *On the official level:* Dialogue in everyday life must be supported *by organizations for dialogue and encounter* at the level of the official religious and civil institutions. They ensure that bridges for relationship remain open so that coexistence can be strengthened and problems can be faced honestly and with good intentions. This is the dialogue which must be transmitted to the popular strata of our society. Simple daily initiatives should be taken which strengthen coexistence in respect, friendship, and collaboration for the common good. As long as dialogue does not reach this popular level in some way, it will remain simply words unrelated to lived reality.

- *Educational institutions:* The educational institutions (home, school, university, etc...) play an important role in relations among the various sectors in society, among them religious sectors too. This requires the formulation of educational programs that build well-rooted bases for a culture which embraces pluralism and respects it. These programs must find their way into school syllabuses, especially into the syllabuses of religious and civic education. They must steer away from anything that defames the religious other, and confirm anything that supports positive relationship with him or her. This must take place without compromising the religious truths to which each group holds.

- *Religious platforms:* “If we are not to overlook the major role played by religion in the make-up of our human character in this part of the world, we must understand the influence of religious platforms on the behaviour and orientations of society.”³⁰ The most important of these are the church and the mosque, where “voices of strife which contradict the essence of religion or voices of love, tolerance

³⁰ Ibid., §29.

and fraternity which call out to all religions³¹ can be raised. It is essential that the use of religious platforms be preserved for the spreading of togetherness and love rather than fanaticism and defamation of the other.

- *Struggle against denominational intolerance:* Denominational intolerance is a fact in our society. “This denominational intolerance finds expression in us all, whether Christian or Muslim, whether consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly. It can surface for the most insignificant and paltry reasons.”³² For this reason, “all social and religious institutions must work together in order to root out this phenomenon by means of comprehensive educational planning and constant action animated by a spirit of friendship and consultation”³³ to confront objectively problems of extremist denominational intolerance with wisdom, patience and total clarity.
- *Church organizations:* It is essential that a *church body*, concerned with relations with Muslims, be established. It would reflect on this subject and take positive and appropriate initiatives which could strengthen coexistence and advance it. In addition, there should be a joint organization (Muslims and Christians) if this be possible.

Conclusion

Our Catholic Churches in the Holy Land, building on our positive and negative experiences in the past, drawing on our full awareness of the needs of our present age, seeking to serve the faithful as they embark on the third millennium and preserving the unity of our people, understand that it is

³¹ Ibid., §23, see also §26.

³² Ibid., §23.

³³ Ibid.

essential to accentuate the framework of Christian-Muslim dialogue, which guarantees fidelity to God and to our people. Our Churches look to the positive and the negative of the past in order to strengthen the positive and to avoid the negative. Embarking from a present, replete with possibility, our Churches see that there is an urgent need to inculcate coexistence among Muslims and Christians in our countries, for the sake of peace, harmony and cooperation.

2. Our Relationship with Jews

The Relationship with Jews

In the past decades, the Church's relationship with Jews³⁴ has greatly advanced in the world. We have felt a certain reserve regarding this relationship, especially because of its political repercussions. Even if this subject is new for our Churches, for political reasons we are familiar with it. We are not dissuaded, however, from reflecting upon our relationship with Jews from a realistic perspective, without ignoring real obstacles. This reflection is guaranteed to help Christians and Jews throughout the world establish their dialogue on bases of truth, and realism, taking into account what is happening in our countries and in our region. As regards the varying concrete conditions of Christians in the different regions of our dioceses, the faithful in each region are called upon to develop a form for this relationship on the basis of the actual conditions in which they live.

The Foundations for This Relationship

Our relationship with Jews is founded on:

³⁴ *Nostra Aetate*, §4.

- *Shared history* in the region of the Middle East. In our countries, Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived together in fruitful social and cultural interaction, this being evident in the clear traces we find of this interaction in Arab civilization. There were certain dark moments in this history and responsibility for these must be assumed by all sides. This historic past is a foundational reference point for a new vision of these relations in the present and the future, without ignoring contemporary factors.
- In one way or another, we are in everyday contact with the *concrete Jewish presence* in this Holy Land, and this obliges us to reflect on how we might formulate the relationship, consonant with our faith, our Christian evangelical values and our reality. The Jewish other is a vibrant reality which we cannot forget or ignore.
- *Sacred Scripture* includes the Old Testament, which constitutes a common ground for Christians and Jews,³⁵ despite the essential difference in its interpretation. Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the history of salvation which finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who does not abolish the Law but rather fulfils it (Mt 5:17). The two sides have developed their interpretations within their particular traditions (the Rabbinical tradition in Judaism, the Patristic tradition in Christianity). At the same time, reading the Bible in this Holy Land has certain particularities which broaden

³⁵ Patriarch Michel Sabbah has said: "The whole of the Bible, the New Testament and the Old (also known as the Torah), is the Word of God, revealed for the salvation of humankind. The two Testaments are intimately connected with one another and they cannot be separated under any pretext" (*Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible*, §35).

horizons.³⁶ Following the Apostle Paul, we note here that "Christ is from them according to the flesh and he is, above all, God for ever (Rm 9:5) and so too are the Virgin Mary and the Apostles.

Difficulties of the Relationship

Our relationship with members of the Jewish religion is confronted with real problems in our countries. These problems must be taken seriously if we desire to establish an honest and positive relationship in the future. The relationship must be between two groups which are real and true:

- *The political situation*: The first of these difficulties is the existing political situation in our countries, which has caused suffering to everyone, and which has overshadowed – and continues to do so – relations among the members of the three monotheistic religions, among them Christians and Jews. The reality of the ongoing struggle has a negative influence on mutual relations. Christians in this region are united in fate with their Muslim brothers and sisters, carrying on their bodies the scars of exile and forced dispersion, confiscation of land and civil discrimination, as well as violation of legitimate human rights.
- *Differing mutual regard*: The mutual regard between members of the three religions in our countries, Christians and Jews among them, is defined by different historical memories. Christians in our countries look on Jews through their painful experience in the modern period (the

³⁶ See *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* of Patriarch Michel Sabbah (1993) in which he deals with the issues linked to the reading of the Bible in the contemporary circumstances of our countries today.

catastrophe of 1948, occupation etc). Jews, on the other hand, look on local Christians through the perspective of their traumatic experiences in the countries from which they came (anti-Semitism, massacres of the Jews in the Nazi period etc) even though the people of our countries were not party to this; or through the perspective of their attitudes to the ongoing struggle and tensions (violence). In both cases, we are confronted with wounded memories because of injustice, oppression, violence and wars. The background from which these memories derive distorts the image of the other, making relationship difficult and harsh.

- *Religious differences*: Despite common features they share, Christians and Jews today each have their particular beliefs. Mutual acceptance of the reality of the religious other is not easy. Difficulty in accepting the other often leads to the distortion of the belief of the other and the subsequent adoption of a negative stand in relation to the other.
- *Mutual ignorance*: Mutual ignorance exists on both sides regarding the reality of the religious beliefs of the other. The bits of information each side has are picked up from unreliable and unfounded popular sources, resulting in a lack of objective understanding of the reality of the other's belief. In some cases, this can even lead to racist positions on both sides.

In order to start building bases for a new relationship with the religious other, and particularly in the case that concerns us here, between Christians and Jews in our countries, we must start with a realistic vision of all factors which influence this relationship in order to honestly and concretely confront the challenge. If not, we build this relationship on imaginary bases which serve no purpose and have no future.

Orientations for the Future

The building up and development of a positive relationship with members of the Jewish religion in our countries is not easy because of certain adjacent negative conditions. However, it is essential that work begin now on the building up of positive and fruitful relations. This is required both by the reality that we experience and by the Christian, evangelical values in which we believe. We would like to present here some guidelines which can be gradually developed in the future in order to give this dialogue a real concrete form.³⁷

- *Lived reality*: Every relationship has its political, social and cultural conditions. If we seek to develop a relationship between two real rather than illusory parties, we must take as our point of departure these very conditions, confronting them honestly and frankly. Otherwise, we build our relations on sand, on ambiguity and pretence, rather than building our relations on rock, on the basis of truth, honest and reality.
- *Mutual knowledge*: Every positive relationship has to base itself on mutual objective knowledge. Thus the Jew should come to know Christians in our countries through their history, reality, environment, and particular experience, in addition to knowing what they believe, rather than relying on prejudice. Precisely the same is true for Christians in our countries, who are called to come to know Judaism as lived by Jews today and as believed by them within the framework of Jewish history and in the context of its reality in the Holy Land today. All this can only strengthen a mutual positive attitude.

³⁷ See *The Christian Presence in the East*, §45 and *Together before God*, §42.

- *Personal relationship*: There is no doubt that personal relationship on the human level is a guarantee that psychological and social barriers which separate the two will be overcome. This requires of us practical steps toward the other at every occasion in our lives so as to transform the other from a labeled stereotype into a person of flesh and blood with his or her tendencies and particularities.
- *Action for truth, justice and peace*: The political struggle and the concomitant continuous tensions make sincere action for truth, justice and peace an essential element of any true relationship.³⁸ This can be accomplished through collaboration with movements for justice and peace within Jewish society, and with all those of good will who seek justice and peace. This also requires a struggle against *discrimination*. Discrimination is an evil at odds with the truth of God, Creator of all humanity, who loves all. Religious differences and the political circumstances in which we live permit racist attitudes on both sides and these must be eradicated so that the true face of the other can be seen. This means that we must distinguish between what is political and what is religious, between Judaism as a religion and Zionism as a political ideology, between the Israeli people and the policies of its government.
- *Means for establishing relationship*: Personal relationships must be supported by relations at the level of the official religious institutions of the three religions, and in our case Christian and Jewish institutions in our countries. Establishing such official bodies will help to construct bridges for mutual knowledge and understanding. We must, therefore, establish a church body in our dioceses, composed of the various church sectors, whose task would be to reflect on this subject and take appropriate initiatives at the local level. This could include collaboration among academics from both parties (historians, exegetes, sociologists, etc) on common theme leading to co-operation in scientific research on the Bible, history, theology, etc., in addition to sincere openness about the current situation.
- *Relationship between Arab Christian and Christians of Jewish origin*: There is a group within the Jewish people who have come to know Christ as God and Saviour. They are part of our local church and they live in their own special conditions. They too have a right to develop their own relationship with Jews and Judaism from the vantage point of their reality and their situation, at the same time as remaining connected to the reality of the local Church and being open to it. We must preserve open bridges of communication between our Churches and this community in order to exchange experiences so that we can learn from one another and so that this community can develop according to its own particularity and as part of the community of faithful in our countries.
- *Tripartite relationship*: Relationship cannot be divided up; relationship in our countries being tripartite, among Muslims, Jews and Christians. The future of our countries is also founded on these relationships. They must develop contemporaneously rather than any particular relationships being at the expense of another. Present difficulties must drive us to redouble our efforts for the sake of this vision of the future, in the hope that we will eventually arrive at the conditions needed so as to translate it into a reality.

³⁸ For this domain, see *Pray for Peace in Jerusalem* (1990) and also *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (1998), both of Patriarch Michel Sabbah.

Conclusion:**Jerusalem: City of Dialogue and Reconciliation**

“God has set aside the region of the Middle East by making it the arena for His dialogue with all of humanity. In this blessed land the three monotheistic religions developed: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Ancient and contemporary circumstances often placed members of these three religions in a situation of struggle and strife. However, they have lived long centuries of communication, interaction and collaboration in the shadow of Arab Islamic civilization. Current difficulties must not take on the character of a predestined fate which is impossible to overcome. Instead, all must work to overcome these difficulties, creating the necessary conditions for sincere encounter and working for the benefit of the human person in our area and throughout the world.”³⁹ Jerusalem is the place *par excellence* where this historic reconciliation can be accomplished on the bases of truth, justice and peace. Thus, Jerusalem will be transformed from a place of conflict and tension into a place of dialogue and reconciliation, far removed from all monopolisation, exclusivity and obstinacy, in a spirit of frankness, understanding and openness. In the midst of all this, our Churches are called to define a form of coexistence, witnessing, before God and humanity, to a new form of relationship among human religious groups for the glory of God and the service of humanity.

Decisions

1. Create and encourage centers and institutions which have as their aim the development of positive relations among the faithful of different religions.
2. Orient Catholic schools and institutions so that they might become places of encounter, of mutual understanding, and true dialogue among the faithful of the different religions.
3. Exhort people to search for a total, definitive and just solution to the problems of the region based on foundations of peace and truth, justice and the rights of peoples to development and self-determination.
4. Promote dialogue with other religions as a fundamental Christian priority, regardless of the degree of response from the other sides in the face of this choice.
5. Encourage personal relations with believers of other religions. These relations, deriving from authentic Gospel values, should be constructed upon respect for the other and acceptance of them as they are.

³⁹ *Together before God*, §42.

Appendix 2

Letter of Patriarch Michael Sabbah and the Theological Commission of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

“Reflections on the Presence of the Church in the Holy Land”

(Jerusalem, 2003).

“*Watchman, what time of night?*” (Isaiah 21,11)

Preamble

1. Christians in the Holy Land, in Israel, Palestine and Jordan, we share the hopes and aspirations of our peoples amidst violence and despair. Here, we are called in various ways to reflect in faith on the concrete issues which we face. Together, we have the responsibility to witness, by word and deed, to the Good News, and to help one another navigate our daily way as disciples of Christ. Thus, we might become a more visible sign of unity, hope, peace and charity in this Land, torn by war and hatred.

2. I present to you today, brothers and sisters, this document, fruit of a common reflection, written together with members of our diocesan Theological Commission, diocesan priests and religious. The document deals with issues that concern our Local Church as well as the Universal Church, in the light of the importance of the Church of Jerusalem and the events that are taking place in these times. Naturally, our reflection derives from the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the issues that we live out in our daily lives. It is in the light of this teaching and of our specific context in the Holy Land that we address this document to you in order to help you to see more clearly

in the midst of the difficulties of daily life. Among the multiple aspects of our lives, we concentrate here on three major points: violence and terrorism, our relations with the Jewish people in the Holy Land and our relations with the Muslims in the Holy Land.

3. These questions might also be of interest to our brothers and sisters in the different Churches around the world. We want to reflect together with you all, and pray together as we live these difficult and complex situations each day. We seek to find in this reflection and communion of prayer the courage to remain faithful to our vocation in this Land that is the Lord's. In our life as members of our different societies and within our Churches, there exists the constant danger of oversimplifying and generalizing. Sincere prayer and our presence together before God will help us to become more conscious of differing perspectives as well as of the truth that must be discovered afresh day to day in the complexity of our circumstances.

Violence and Terrorism

A Condemnation of Terrorism

4. We have always condemned and continue to condemn all acts of violence against individuals and society.⁴⁰ We have condemned and we continue to condemn especially terrorism, acts of extreme violence, often organized, which are intended to injure and kill the innocent in order that such terrorism yield reluctant support for one's cause. In a previous document we clearly stated: “Terrorism is illogical,

⁴⁰ See Michel Sabbah, *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998), §14-19. See also the speech delivered by the Patriarch on September 11, 2002 at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem on the anniversary of the attacks in the United States, *Jerusalem*, 4-5/8 (2002), 151-152.

irrational and unacceptable as a means of resolving conflict."⁴¹ Indeed, terrorism is both immoral and a sin.

A Context of Despair

5. We are painfully conscious, though, of the injustices, their inhuman hurts and the climate which condition these acts of violence, most notably the occupation. We have stated: "In the case of terrorism there are two guilty parties: first, those who carry out such action, those who plan and support them, and secondly, those who create situations of injustice which provoke terrorism."⁴² This climate of violence knows no borders; it does not distinguish between Israeli and Palestinian. Among both peoples, helplessness, frustration and despair unleash emotions of anger and revenge in a never-ending cycle of violence. Legitimate self-defense is corroded by disproportionate and evil means, especially collective punishment or the support of the occupation, under the guise of trying to insure security or freedom. Realistic hopes for true peace through justice, pardon and love are labeled illusions of facile optimism. They are replaced by the paralysis of cynical fatalism. Walls are then erected both in the country and in the hearts of its inhabitants. Hope is reduced to mere daily survival. The Holy Land, some claim, has become unholy.

Our Reason for Hope

6. In this very Land God has gifted humanity with the Son of God, the Christ. His shedding of his own blood by the violent act of crucifixion has reconciled us to God and has broken down the walls of hostility between us. His

⁴¹ Michel Sabbah, *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998), §15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, §15.

resurrection has defeated hatred, violence and death. "He is the peace between us and has made the two peoples into one" (cf. Eph 2:13-16, Rom 5:10-11).

A Pedagogy of Non-violence

7. God is always calling the disciples of Jesus Christ to be a community of reconciliation.⁴³ In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we are called to be the prophetic bearers of the good news of peace to those far away and those close at hand (cf. 2 Cor 13:13, Eph 2:17, Is 57:19). We accomplish this not through acts of violence but through concrete gestures of peacemaking, which oppose a culture of death and contribute to a culture of life. This God-given and difficult vocation of the Church and of her members requires a specific pedagogy or learning process of an active, creative Gospel of non-violence in our attitudes, in our words and in our actions. Peace making is not a tactic but a way of life.

Jews, Judaism and State of Israel

Church Teaching

8. In communion with the entire Church, the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Jews and Judaism is also our teaching. With the entire Church, we meditate on the roots of our faith in the Old Testament, which we share with the Jewish people, and in the New Testament that is written largely by Jews about Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁴ With the entire Church, we regret the attitudes of

⁴³ See *Ibid.*, Section 6 "Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Loving Your Enemy," § 28-37.

⁴⁴ See Michel Sabbah, *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* (November 1993).

contempt, the conflicts and the hostility that have marked the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

Our Context

9. We seek to apply and live the teaching of the worldwide Catholic Church within our own particular context.⁴⁵ Unlike our Christian brothers and sisters in Europe, in the Holy Land, our history as Christians has been the history of a minority community (a status that we shared with the Jews in the Middle East) in the midst of a civilization that is predominantly Muslim. For many centuries, we have not been a dominant majority in relation to the Jewish people as was the case in the West.

10. Our contemporary context is unique: we are the only Local Church that encounters the Jewish people in a State that is defined as Jewish and where the Jews are the dominant and empowered majority, a reality that dates from 1948. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between the State of Israel and the Arab world, and in particular between Israelis and Palestinians, means that the national identity of the majority of our faithful is locked in conflict with the national identity of the majority of the Jews.

11. We are called to unity, reconciliation and love from within our local Church. In our very midst and as full members of our Church there are Hebrew speaking Catholics who are Jewish or who have chosen to live in the midst of the Jewish people.⁴⁶ The Holy Father has just named an auxiliary bishop for this community. Adding to the

⁴⁵ See Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, "Our Relation with the Jews" in "Relations with Believers of Other Religions", *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 153-157.

⁴⁶ "Our Relation with the Jews," 156.

richness of the Church in Jerusalem are also many Catholics from other lands, who have made their home in Jerusalem. Seeking to be in communion together, Arabs, Jews and those from other nations, the Church of Jerusalem learns to be a visible sign of the oneness of all humanity. In our constant search for dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters, we cannot make abstraction of this context.

The Reality

12. As Church, we witness the continued Israeli military occupation of Palestinian lands and the bloody violence between the two peoples. Together with all men and women of peace and goodwill, including many Israeli and Palestinian Muslims, Christians and Jews, we are called to be both a voice of truth and a healing presence. The worldwide Catholic Church teaches that dialogue with the Jewish people is distinct from the political options adopted by the State of Israel. Furthermore, "the existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious but in their reference to the common principles of international law."⁴⁷ The Church is called to be a prophetic witness in our particular context, a witness that dares imagine a different future: freedom, justice, security, peace and prosperity for all inhabitants of the Holy Land that is first and foremost the Lord's.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (June 24, 1985), §25.

⁴⁸ See Michel, Sabbah, *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Questions and Answers on Justice and Peace in the Holy Land* (September 1998).

Perspectives

13. Facing this heavy responsibility and difficult task the Church of Jerusalem is struggling, learning, striving and she counts on all her faithful, Arabs, Jews and those from other nations, to help her discern the will of God and the faithful discipleship of Christ. We are already engaged in searching out our Jewish brothers and sisters in an exciting dialogue from our proper common context – that of a Land sadly torn by war and violence. Our faithful in Israel live in permanent, ongoing dialogue with their Jewish neighbors, a dialogue of life and friendship. In the Palestinian territories, our Catholic institutions (the diocesan seminary, the Catholic University of Bethlehem, etc.) teach our faithful about the Jews and their heritage. Our diocesan commission for relations with the Jewish people is an active organ within the life of our Church, helping us learn more about Jews and Judaism. As Church, we dare to hope that our prayer and witness further justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace and, in furthering these, contribute also to the fraternal dialogue that can and must develop between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land within the specific context we share.

Muslims, Islam and Arab Society

Our Context

14. We are realistic in the face of the possibilities for dialogue and collaboration with our Muslim brothers and sisters and the difficulties that confront such a project. The concrete reality of Arab society is different from country to country: here we speak from our experience of this reality in the Holy Land, where Christians and Muslims have lived together for almost 1400 years. This society has known many good days and bad ones and is still faced today with important challenges in its search for equilibrium, face to face with modernity, pluralism, democracy and the quest for

peace and justice. Our attitude, however, is rooted in the positive teaching of the Church regarding Muslims since the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁹

Two Principles

15. Two principles animate relations between Muslim and Christian Arabs in the Holy Land.⁵⁰ Firstly, all of us who are Arabs, whether Christian or Muslim, belong to one people, sharing a long history, a language, a culture and a society. Secondly, as Christian Arabs, we are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in Arab and Muslim society. We are called likewise, to be witnesses in Jewish Israeli society too.

The Reality

16. In daily life, even though relations between Christians and Muslims are generally good, we are fully aware that there are certain difficulties and challenges that must be confronted. These include mutual ignorance, an authority vacuum that produces insecurity, discrimination and that trend towards Islamization among certain political movements, which endangers not only Christians but also many Muslims who desire an open society.⁵¹ When Islamization constitutes an infringement on the liberty of the Christian, we must insist that our identity and our religious liberty be respected. This complexity is sometimes exploited for the political end of dividing the society. However, through

⁴⁹ See Ecumenical Council Vatican II, “*Nostra Aetate* – Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian religions,” §3.

⁵⁰ See Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, “Our relationship with Muslims” in “Relations with Believers of Other Religions”, *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 148-152.

⁵¹ See Michel Sabbah, *Pray for Peace in Jerusalem* (Pentecost 1990), §8.

dialogue and other diverse initiatives, Christians and Muslims are called to collaborate with one another in the construction of a common society, founded on principles of mutual respect and responsibilities.

A Pedagogy

17. In this situation, we seek to help our Arab faithful, who are the majority of our flock, in integrating and living the complexity of their identity as Christians, as Arabs and as citizens, in Jordan, Palestine and Israel. The fact that Christians are statistically a small community does not, in any way, condemn them to irrelevance or to despair. We encourage all our faithful to take their rightful place in public life and to help build up society in all its domains.⁵²

Conclusion: With Muslims and Jews - A Vocation

18. We are deeply conscious of the vocation of the Church of Jerusalem to be a Christian presence in the midst of society, be it Muslim Arab or Jewish Israeli. We believe that we are called to be leaven, contributing to the positive resolution of the crises that we are passing through. We are a voice from within our societies whose history, language and culture we share. We seek to be a presence that promotes reconciliation, helping all peoples towards a dialogue that promotes understanding and that will ultimately lead to peace in this Land. "If there is no hope for the poor there will be no hope for anyone, not even the so-called rich."⁵³

⁵² See Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, "The Christian in Public Life", *Diocesan Synod of the Catholic Churches: The General Pastoral Plan* (February 2000), 159-169.

⁵³ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis: Apostolic Exhortation* (Oct 16, 2003), §67.

19. As we approach Christmas, brothers and sisters, we address to you our festive greetings. Might this feast be a source of peace in your hearts and in your souls. Merry Christmas! During this holiday season, let us pray to the Christ Messiah, Prince of peace, that he might make of each one of us an artisan of peace, who lives and communicates the peace that is sung by the angels in the skies of our Land. God is the Creator and Redeemer of us all, and in the mystery of this divine sonship brought to realization in us, we are all brothers and sisters, called to practice justice and live in the true peace that God bestows on those who search for it.

December 3, 2003

Signed by the H.B. Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

+ Michel Sabbah

and members of the diocesan Theological Commission

+ G. Boulos Marcuzzo, Auxiliary Bishop

Frans Bouwen pb

Gianni Caputa sdb

Peter Du Brul sj

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