

**REFLECTIONS ON SOLIDARITY**  
**AND**  
**THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT**

From November 5-10, 2000 I joined the Jewish Federation of MetroWest Mission to Israel to demonstrate our concern and solidarity. As a Catholic I felt compelled to be with Israelis during this time of crisis. Never again can we Christians remain silent when Jews in their Homeland or anywhere are being threatened.

While in Israel, over and over I heard from Israelis that they want only to live in dignity, in peace, without fear, with their neighbors. It is a very sad situation. The sudden uprising and killing of both Jews and Arabs in Israel cannot be tolerated. It is an uprising that is difficult to comprehend when confronted with the Arabs' willingness to send children to the front lines to purchase the world's sympathy with their children's blood.

Israel's efforts through Prime Minister Barak to forge a workable compromise had been rejected by Yasser Arafat at the recent Camp David agreements. All of us hoped and prayed that some kind of co-existence could be formulated. Again, it was necessary for me personally to go to Israel to tell Israelis that we care; you are not alone. Wherever we went, I could and did tell men/women/children of Israel

that we stand with them. We thanked them for their courage, their hope, their saving of Israel. Israel has gone the extra mile in seeking a fair and honorable agreement but has been met with hatred and rejection. Israelis plead for peace. They want to live in peace. They also recognized that they could and should do more with and for Israeli Arabs who are citizens of Israel. This was said by many Israelis, both young and old.

In Israel we witnessed vicious anti-Semitism, efforts to destroy the Jewish presence in Israel. The synagogue in Jericho was burned to the ground; the synagogue in Efrat was desecrated; Joseph's Tomb was destroyed; books burned and the tomb turned into a mosque. Blatant anti-Jewish sermons have been delivered in mosques telling the Arabs to kill Jews and kill all Americans who associate with Jews not only in Israel but anywhere in the world.

Buses carrying children had been blown up just before I came to Israel; three children in one family had been maimed for life—one lost a leg, another his feet, and a third his legs. Many more buses have been blown up since I was in Israel and bombings of soldiers at a bus stop have taken place. Israeli soldiers have been taken hostage; there are now eight soldiers held hostage.

Indeed, Israel's struggle is our struggle; we stand with Israel pleading for an honorable and fair peace which, of course, demands compromise on both sides. Over and over we heard this from Israelis. But we also heard that through this uprising Arabs are asking Jews that they leave. But, "We are strong," said the Mayor of Rishon le Zion. "We will not leave Israel."

In October of 2000, the NCLCI issued this statement: (INSERT)

However, there is another vexing problem that is of great concern to me—the Palestinian Arab-Christians of the Middle East and especially in Israel. Yes, indeed, Palestinian Arab-Christians are disappearing in Israel. So I'd like to address that issue.

Just last week I received my copy of *Origins* which is a Catholic news and documentary service. It carried an article by Cardinal Adam Maida of Detroit which was a copy of the text of an address which the Cardinal gave at a seminar sponsored by the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation. Just one quote will let you know why I am disturbed.

"Thanks to my pilgrimage to the Holy Land last year, now more than ever I have great empathy for the trials and tribulations of those who have bravely

chosen to remain in the place of Jesus' birth and the place of their own birth. Both Palestinian Arab-Christians and Muslims alike have had to endure daily deprivations and humiliations brought about by the actions of the Israeli government and/or the military.”

What a devastating, untrue comment!

Are Christians leaving because of Israel? Is it Israel's fault?

Daniel Pipes, Editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, discusses the issue of disappearing Christians in the Middle East.

“The transfer of power to Bethlehem from Israel to the PA just before Christmas 1995 saw a diminishing Christian presence in Jesus' birthplace. The Christian population of Bethlehem, previously eighty- percent is now only one-third. For the first time in nearly two millennia, the most identifiably Christian town on earth—Bethlehem—has lost its Christian majority. The same changes have taken place in two other famously Christian towns—Nazareth and Jerusalem.

Do I blame Israel as did Cardinal Maida? Indeed not!

“The Christian population decline has two main causes: emigration and declining birth rates. Emigration represents the end of a long process of exclusion and persecution. On the West Bank, a nearly permanent Muslim boycott of Christian businesses is the problem. In Egypt, fundamentalist Muslims constantly target Christians. The Lebanese civil war of 1975-90, when reduced to its essentials, represented a successful effort by Muslims to reduce Christian power in the country. But by far the worst situation is in the Sudan, where the civil war that has been raging most of the time since 1954 has led to wholesale atrocities.

Declining birth rates can also be seen throughout the region. In Israel, for example, live births per thousand among Muslims come to 37; among Christians, a mere 22 per thousand. In addition, the small number of Christians leads some to marry Muslims, which effectively means they are lost to their community.” (*Middle East Quarterly*, David Pipes.)

But why do Christian Arabs emigrate from Israel?

“It is true, Palestinian Christians are leaving their homes to relocate where they hope to have a more secure future, where they will no longer be caught in the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Statistics indicate that more Palestinian Christians than Muslims are leaving. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that Christians generally have a better chance of assimilating into new communities outside of the Middle East because they often have a better education, larger incomes, fewer children and more family ties outside of the region.

Another reason for the flight of Palestinian Christians is that they are a visible and vulnerable minority in the territories of the Palestinian Authority (PA). As the PA gains more territory, Palestinian Christians find themselves squeezed into a deteriorating situation as they fall deeper under Muslim control.

Jews and Christians in Israel, including those in Judea and Samaria, feel the same pressure from Islam. Jews and Christians are both *dhimmi* people according to Islamic law. Jews, as long as they continue to be the largest part of the population, are able to fight the process of *dhimmitude*.

Christians, however, have no resources with which to fight it, other than what they have as citizens of Israel.

The primary resource Christians have in their fight against *dhimmitude* is Israel's record of protecting all people's basic freedoms, including their freedom of speech and worship. But, being a small non-Jewish community in Israel, Christians are subject to many forms of intimidation and extortion by the Muslim officials, Muslims being the largest minority group in Israel. By themselves, Christians in Israel, a minority in a minority, do not have the means to protect themselves, leaving them in a very precarious situation.

While David Blewett of NCLCI was in Israel, the crosses in the Christian cemetery of Beit Jala were smashed. For centuries, Beit Jala has been a quiet Christian village situated between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It has recently been in the news as the Christian village being shot at by the Israeli army. What was not known is that PA militiamen occupied homes, schools and churches in the village to have places from which to fire on Gilo, a nearby Jerusalem neighborhood, and to which Israel would return fire.”

While I was in Israel, I visited Gilo and learned the story of Beit Jala. “This is a frightening development that puts all the Christians of Beit Jala as well as Christians throughout the Palestinian territory in even greater danger. They have been put on notice.

In Israel I learned that now is the time for Christians and all people who value human rights to speak up for Palestinian Christians. Since they cannot speak for themselves, we must speak for them. It concerns me, however, that when Palestinian Christians most need the support of Christians and Christian organizations, there is silence, denial or collaboration with the Palestinian Authority, and to blame Israel is completely false information!

Research: *Backgrounder* of David Blewett, Feb. 2001