

HOLY PLACES AND CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN JERUSALEM

A NEW EMPHASIS IN THE ATTITUDE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Walter Zander

During recent months the Vatican has issued several statements about Jerusalem which are of great importance. On March 14, 1971, Pope Paul VI, speaking about peace to the multitude in St Peter's Square, said:

"In the Middle East we must protect a grave right and duty in the name of the whole of Christianity. We refer to the recognition of the special claims of the Holy Places in Palestine, of the continued residence of Christians in that troubled land, and of the statute of Jerusalem, where one cannot deny a very special convergence of a pluralism of historical and religious rights."

About a week later, on March 22/23 **L'Osservatore Romano** published a prominent and authoritative article under the heading "**JERUSALEM AND PEACE**". This article accused Israel of forcibly transforming the character of Jerusalem, by measures of a legislative, fiscal and urban nature at the expense of the Moslem and Christian populations. It protested against the expropriation of Arab land, especially of 660 acres on Mount Scopus and 2,400 acres in the Arab sector and in the outskirts of the town, and mentioned an additional project concerning the Old City which would force another 6,000 Arabs to leave.

It saw the purpose of all these actions in the "judaisation" of Jerusalem - "*un piano con finalità ebraica*" - which was to be established as a fait accompli before any negotiations about the future of the town could begin. The existence and development of minority communities, the article maintained, was threatened by a policy of slow suffocation, and Muslims and Christians would finally have to look elsewhere for a future which was no longer available to them in their homeland.

It warned that any political agreement on other questions could find in this point an "*insuperable obstacle*" and that the damage to the cause of peace in the Middle East could become "*irreparable*". In conclusion the article called for international action to guarantee the special character of the city and the rights of the minority communities.

As was to be expected, this statement attracted world-wide attention. In Rome the Director of the Press Office of the Vatican was informed about the strong reaction to the article in Israel. In Jerusalem a high-level meeting was held the nature of which was not disclosed, and the Apostolic Delegation issued the following communiqué:

"His Excellency Monsignore Pio Laghi, Apostolic Delegate attended a meeting on March 26, 1971 called

by Dr Yaacov Herzog, General Director of the Prime Minister's Office. Matters of common interest were discussed. Reports by some local newspapers on the subject of this meeting, referring in particular to the position of the Holy See with regard to Jerusalem, are based on purely arbitrary conjectures of press correspondents."

On April 7, **Le Monde** reported that King Husain had addressed identical messages to Pope Paul VI, Patriarch Athenagoras I in Constantinople, Cardinal Pierre-Paul Méouchi, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch. and Dr Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he accused Israel with continuing with her plans of "judaisation" and annexation contrary to the resolutions of the United Nations. "*The requisition of Arab land,*" he said, "*the construction of residential Jewish quarters and the pressure on Christian and Muslim citizens to make them emigrate will bring about in a short time that our Holy Places will become sites for tourists."*

Lastly on Good Friday, April 19, Pope Paul VI himself took up the matter again. At the end of the procession which commemorates the Way of the Cross he addressed the assembled congregation at the Colosseum in Rome, and having reiterated "*the special claims of the Holy Places in Palestine*" he devoted himself to the need for the continued presence of the Christian communities in the country:

"Today we must look with affection in our hearts to the Christian community of this Holy Land, already so sorely tried in the course of history these our Brothers, who live where Jesus lived, and who, surrounded by the Holy Places, are the successors of that ancient and very first Church, from which all the other churches take their origin. We wish to salute them and assure them of our affection and of the sympathy of Christians throughout the world."

"These our brothers continue to be in need, as never before, of our spiritual, moral and material support. The help which the Christian world has never left wanting to the brethren in Jerusalem and in Palestine, does not serve merely to maintain the actual buildings which record the great mysteries of the Redemption, but also the religious and social works necessary to maintain the life of the community."

For many years the proclamations of the Holy See about Jerusalem had essentially concentrated on the Holy Places, and this concern for the Sanctuaries had been the basis of the

demand for a special statute and the internationalisation of the city. Now a new element has been added: the concern for the preservation and continued presence of the Christian community, and the interest of the Church in Jerusalem has become threefold.

The attitude of the Israel Government naturally differs on each of the three issues. Regarding the Christian Holy Places no controversy about any question of substance exists between the Churches on one side and the government of the country on the other. In this respect the situation today is essentially the same as it was under Jordanian rule. All agree about the need for free access to the Sanctuaries, for their preservation and protection, for freedom of religious worship and - on a lower level - for the exemption from taxation.

All these principles are recognised in theory and applied in practice: and where difficulties or controversies about Christian Sanctuaries have arisen, as for instance between Copts and Abyssinians in the Holy Sepulchre at Easter 1970. they sprang from conflicts between the Christian communities themselves. Neither the Jordanian nor the Israel Government were ever involved as parties in such issues.

The situation is different, of course, as far as the Holy Places of Islam are concerned. Both the Mosque of Omar (Dome of the Rock) and the El Aqsa Mosque stand in the Temple ground. Jewish Orthodoxy maintains that ultimately, in the days of the Messiah, the Temple will be rebuilt and the sacrifices re-established. Muslims therefore fear for the safety of the Mosques and there is a latent conflict between Muslim piety and Jewish Messianic expectation. No difficulties exist concerning the Christian Sanctuaries and their administration proceeds smoothly.

There also prevails a certain measure of agreement about the desirability of a legally binding international guarantee for the safeguarding of the Holy Places. In 1949, the Governments of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, at the request of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, presented to the General Assembly a formal Declaration by which each of them solemnly undertook *“to guarantee the protection of and the free access to the Holy Places, religious buildings and sites of Palestine situated in the territory which may be placed under its authority by the final settlement of the Palestine problem, or pending that settlement, in the territory at present occupied by it under armistice agreements.”*

This Declaration was accepted by the United Nations and formed the basis for the administration of the Holy Places by Jordan. Israel at that time likewise agreed to the same principle although no formal steps were then taken. In June 1967 the Knesset passed the *“Protection of Holy Places Law”* according to which *“the Holy Places shall be protected from desecration and any other violation and from anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the*

members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places.”

Furthermore the Israel Government indicated that they would be willing to present similar Declarations to the United Nations as the Arab Governments had done in 1949; and Mr Eban repeatedly renounced *“exclusive and unilateral control of the Sanctuaries”*. offering instead negotiated agreements about them.

Whilst there are no objections on any side against legally binding international Declarations on the Holy Places, the prospects for any international government over Jerusalem - by the creation of a *corpus separatum* are exceedingly remote. Both Arabs and Israelis alike throughout the years have consistently resisted any suggestion to renounce their sovereignty over Jerusalem in favour of an international régime; and as the representative of Israel in the General Assembly stated more than 20 years ago, *“however divided the two populations are in other respects, they are united in their opposition to territorial internationalisation”*.

Jews and Arabs time and again have proclaimed that for the safeguarding of the Holy Places internationalisation would be unnecessary, *“a measure without purpose”* to use the words of the Jordanian representative; that it would be incompatible with the elementary principles of democracy; that economically it would be impossible, and that it would be impracticable even if limited to the Walled City or the Holy Places themselves.

Against these arguments no one has been able to explain on what basis a *“government of and by the people”* could lawfully and morally be replaced by a *“government for the sake of the Holy Places”*. Accordingly international support for the scheme which in 1947 was strong enough to muster a two-third majority in the General Assembly, gradually waned, and by 1950 Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union had withdrawn their support *“since the proposed solution was satisfactory neither to the Arab nor to the Jewish inhabitants”*. Even after the June campaign the scheme of internationalisation was not revived in the United Nations.

What now is the position concerning the demand for a continued living Christian presence in and around Jerusalem, as proclaimed by Pope Paul VI? The mutual expulsion of national minorities has, unfortunately, become a tragic feature of modern warfare. It has affected Poles and Germans; Greeks and Turks; Arabs and Jews; and the Arabs themselves in 1948 expelled the Jews from their part of the Old City and destroyed synagogues and cemeteries. Nevertheless, the demand for a continued living presence of Christian and Muslim religious communities in Jerusalem - not only the preservation of pilgrim-sites, museums and graveyards - in the opinion of this writer is fully justified as an essential inalienable principle.

The demand, contrary to the plan for internationalisation, commands universal support. Among the Churches internationalisation had, for all practical purposes the backing only of Rome. Patriarch Alexis of Moscow had denounced it as a “*vile colonialist conspiracy*”, and the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch certainly shared his views. As for the Greek and Armenian Patriarchs of Jerusalem it had been made known that they were “*unable to express their thoughts freely until the occupation of their territory had come to an end*”.

Even Athenagoras I, the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, so closely linked with Pope Paul VI in a common effort towards the reunion of the Church, had remained silent on this issue; and among Protestants some leading churchmen and theologians had even expressed their satisfaction with the reunification of the Holy City and the way in which the Israelis had dealt with the Christian Sanctuaries. On the question of a living Christian presence in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, however, there exists neither schism nor division. On this point all Christendom is united, and the same applies to Muslims and the world of Islam.

For many years the Jewish National Movement has drawn invaluable support from Christians, especially Protestants in the English-speaking world. To many of these the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland was a fulfilment of a biblical promise, and some even linked it to the Second Coming. Many of the most active supporters - statesmen, soldiers, writers or just common people were believing and practising Christians. If their sympathies cool off or vanish, the loss for Israel would be great.

But most important, the continued presence of Christian and Muslim religious communities is in accordance with the declared aims of Israel's own policy. When on June 7, 1967, General Dayan made his famous broadcast he especially included the following passage : “*We came to Jerusalem not to possess ourselves of the Holy Places of others, or to interfere with the members of other faiths, but to safeguard the City's integrity and to live in it with others in peace.*”

This proclamation has never been withdrawn. For the Jews, national renaissance is the main purpose of the Return. But this does not require the elimination of others. Both Christians and Muslims have contributed immeasurably to the sanctification of the Holy Land. The Christian world in particular has been linked to the country throughout the ages in prayer, memories and hope - not unlike those of the Jews themselves; and it was a Cluniac monk, not a rabbi, who wrote “*Jerusalem the Golden*”.

The reference of the Pope to the “*pluralism of historical and religious rights*” admits religious co-existence and ought to be welcomed. In June 1967 the Israel Government gave a solemn assurance to the Christian and Muslim world that the Holy Places would be safe, and this greatly helped to

allay anxiety. A similar assurance that Israel will do nothing to endanger the Christian and Muslim religious communities in Jerusalem may have the same beneficial effect and even be a step on the long, thorny road towards peace.