

Ibillin 2/8/99

Dear Beloved Friends,

Since I was ordained priest in 1965, I have been ministering in the village of Ibillin, not far from Nazareth. Since then I learned a lot. I am still learning so much. We are so far away from where we started. My small VW is no more there. The village is presently a small town with 8,500 inhabitants. It had around 4,000 when I first arrived. There was my small VW and two or three other cars. Now almost every family has one if not two or more cars.... When I came to Ibillin there was no electricity, no telephones, hardly any water. We used to draw water from the well of the church. This is now closed. We have electricity and water. At Mar Elias College, we have twelve phone lines. We hardly had a second hand type-writing machine, nowadays our computers are all linked with internet. We have come from far away. The evolution was not gradual, but made with gigantic jumps forward. Can you imagine that within two months we shall start teaching from distance with video active methods? Had we all the same equipment, you could see us, we could see you, and interact in the same way as if we were physically present to each other. This is becoming an amazing world.

After 33 years in Ibillin, here I am the president of the biggest Christian and private school in Israel. I was fortunate and privileged to build the school with your help. You probably do not know that it is because of your friendship and your solidarity, that I am still standing on my feet, and was able with local and international friends to build this campus. It is the first and the only Arab campus that exists in all of Israel. You have to believe me when I say the Lord has made for us great things. Holy is His name.

In the past, I did apply for some small grants from different organizations. I was always happy to receive any help from you. I give you tribute for everything I have been doing to serve better my people. In order to help our community to stand on its feet, self-reliant and economically independent through self-help. Our major goal is to continue and intensify our active undertaking in the building up of this country for everybody: Jew, Palestinian Christian, Moslem, Druze or others. We were all created babies on the image with the likeness of God.

I have written a five years' plan (2001-2005). We need to develop and expand the campus. We want to become self-reliant, as soon as possible. This application is the tool needed to implement the vision that started 17 years ago on the former mount of the Ogre, which is the present day Mount of Light. I know that no one single person or church would be able to provide us with this big amount: over ten million US\$. Nonetheless, we invite you to contribute with whatever amount you can afford to donate. The result will be as when small seeds, which are put together, can produce a life-giving loaf of bread. Some one has donated every stone on campus. To all of you, we are deeply grateful and sincerely appreciative. We do not want to see you left aside in the implementation of this long awaited dream in Galilee.

I am still careful to listen to the expectations of our community. That is the reason the community was always deeply involved in what ever we undertook. I feel so proud to tell you that we have 250 faculty members working at Mar Elias Educational Institutions. Had MEEI not existed, where would these 250 scholars be today? In which country would they be dispersed? The brain drain among the Arab community inside Israel very specially among the Christian minority is very seriously alarming. It is essential to do whatever possible to slow down this dangerous emigration of Christians abroad.

Nowadays with the prospects for peace in the Middle East the unique opportunity for the Christian minority is to affirm itself among both Judaism and Islam. Only with the

help of educational institutions, might we be able to instill hope in the hearts; to build peace among human beings; and to accept each other as different, but complementary. The otherness is considered as an enrichment, never as a danger or a threat. Our college is one among the rare sources of hope in Israel. Our students are Muslim, Christians, Druze and Jews. It is possible to live together. Not without some problems. These are to be overcome and solved. This is how we believe peace can be built. I tell you- we need your help! We need your generosity. We need your commitment. We need your friendship and are ready to share with you. We might be too ambitious.....but we want to help our people. We cannot stay staggering like we were thirty and forty years ago. We have to move, to go ahead, and to sometimes get our hands dirty with building the real peace that is forged in the hearts, before it is signed on paper anywhere on this planet.

The need to develop the campus of MEEI is real and urgent. We need either to do it or disappear. We shall do it. I am calling on you to contribute generously in the development of the campus.

Once this five years' plan is realized and runs, we would become self-reliant. Many generations would profit from the facilities. With an endowment fund for scholarships, no students would be left aside because of financial problems.

Yes, my Dear Friends, we have already started and would intensify the building of peace in the hearts of the younger generation.

Once this expansion of MEEI is finished and running to its full capacity, we would provide jobs directly for about 500 families. The majority of these would otherwise become self-exiled in Europe, USA, Canada or Australia.....

The Jubilee Year 2000 is approaching very fast. What are we ready to do together? Why not join hands and efforts to create this project, and develop the Mar Elias Educational Institutions? It is possible despite the immensity of the project.

Together, and only together, we are stronger than the storm.

Abuna Elias Chacour,
President of MEEI