

## Restoration and Redemption of Palestinian Christianity

We need to hear about what is happening in the Holy Land from those who live there, those who have it in their heart, they are the people of the Holy Land. Father Chacour a candidate for the Peace Noble prize, is one of those that should be listened to.

We seldom read or hear some positive things about the situation in the Holy Land /Israel / Palestine. The media is focused on dramatic events on sensational actions and tragedies .These are not rare. It is not difficult to find them all around ....but these do not constitute all the reality. The silent majority of the people whether Palestinian or Jew, Christian or Moslem is fed up with the prevailing violence and of the apparent hypocrisy of political games.

Often we heard and we still hear and read about hatred and violence ...we even got used to approach the survival of Christians in the Holy Land with complaints, regrets and accusations of some far away party... because of the continued emigration of Christians from the Holy Land.

It is time to look deeper to work together, and to create alternatives that provide hope for all of us :Palestinian Christians, Moslem Palestinians, and Jewish Israelis. Being fully aware of the tragic situation of Christians in this Land, and of the role they might play amidst their Jewish and their Moslem countrymen.

I became sensitized to the situation since I became priest in 1965. I felt that it was useless to continue with the complaints and with decrying this or that situation; this or that group of people. We risk getting used to throwing the first stone on the houses of others, forgetting that our own house is made of fragile glass. I wondered what could I do to improve the situation?

That's how I was lead to undertake the projects of building Secondary Schools, after having been building Community Centers and youth centers with public libraries wherever this was possible, and wherever the local population was ready to share the vision and to match the efforts, even financially.

The second institution I had the privilege of creating is the Prophet Elias College in the village Ibillin in Galilee between Haifa Acco and Nazareth ....Although in the beginning it was conceived for the children of Ibillin, we soon discovered that others from other villages are attracted and thus started streaming to the small "Prophet Elias Secondary School "

Having started with 82 students in 1981 we have presently over 1600 students . They commute from all over Israel to the school .They are Moslem ,Christian, and Jewish students From the very beginning we opened the doors to every one , thus we hired eight Jewish teachers :one man and seven women to act on the staff of the school. This was the first step of this big project.

The second was to open a College for those who finish secondary school and would like to continue their education for at least two more years but they had nowhere to go. They used to emigrate. As soon as this program was initiated, I saw the big dream occupying my mind and my imagination: A Christian Arab Israeli University in the GALILEE region. We adopted the well known philosophy: Do and then speak. With my terms I would say: have first the baby and then look for clothes.

Thus We started with the University program. We plan for the five coming years that would end during 1999 to develop the campus and thus accommodate 1500 university students from all over the country. Some would be from abroad: from Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. This project would be run with Christian inspiration mainly from the Sermon on the Mount: We want to educate our young generation to hunger and thirst for justice and in the same time to get involved, to get their hands "dirty" to build peace in their hearts, in their country and among their countrymen and women. Such a project is destined to become very soon financially self supporting, like the secondary school that is already self supporting.

It will also provide jobs for at least 250 Arab Christian Intellectuals and would need around 200 support staff for the college that is presently in need of an additional 50 classrooms and two dorms: one for boys and another

for girls. Each one for 250 persons . It would be of prime importance to build also a chapel for the school. The amount of money needed is not that large, compared to the services to be provided and to the hope that such a project might generate for Christianity in The Holy Land. This place is already a center for encounter between the different religions in Israel. It is a place where the multilinguicity is a daily reality.

Our relations with our Jewish neighbors and co-citizens are excellent, although we often agree to disagree agreeably. We are already on the map of Israel; Mainly of "Intellectual Israel ". Much could be done, so much is still to be done. We need everybody's advice and encouragement. This is a project that has to be a community project. A large community project. It cannot be a simple or simply a, denominational project. It is meant to be a pan-Christian project. Nonetheless it is not destined to be a project for "Christian-Catholics" it is built to be for human beings without any discrimination as we learn from the Sermon on the Mount.

This project is a vision of the future and for the future. We decided to stop complaining about the tragedies of the past or about the trauma of the present time. We do not want to wait and see what surprises does the future hide for us and with which new tragedies we would be surprised and choked. We rather want to start now and here to prepare ourselves to face the future with our vision and with our determination. The future of Christianity in the Holy Land shall be what we Christians want it to be or not to be. Better to toil

It is better to toil and work now to choose a future with a genuine initiative of mature responsibility rather than wait to receive the dictates of others about our own future. We have our say in the decision making of this country in the Middle East.

Throughout the immense stream of pilgrims to the Holy Land, we have our say in the whole world. No one would listen to us unless our voices become audible, loud and clear. We need to make sense in order to be heard. If we keep silent then it is Christ who is not heard. In this country we are accountable for such guilty silence. The Possibilities to convey our message or rather the message of Christ are many and strong. But they are not easy, they are not impossible either. Yes, it is easy to shout "wolf, wolf". It is much more difficult to be a good shepherd who kills the wolf and spares the flock. We decided to save the flock and to share our dreams together.

Yes in this way we shall overcome soon and surely. Pray for us and with us.

Abuna Elias Chacour President of Prophet Elias