

Preserving the Remnant

Caught in a conflict between Muslims and Jews, Christians are quickly disappearing from the land where the faith was born. The Franciscans who have maintained the Custody of the Holy Land since the time of the Crusades are now struggling to stem the tide of emigration.

Father Peter Vasko, OFM, a native of New York, is the president of The Holy Land Foundation, a charitable group set up to help preserve the Christian presence in the Holy Land. With the rise of tensions between the Israeli government and the Palestinian community on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the plight of Christians has become especially difficult. Father Vasko spoke to Catholic World Report about the continuing crisis in the Holy Land, and the role his organization hopes to play in finding a solution.



Could you give us some background? What is it about the present situation in the Holy Land that caused the Franciscan order to set up this new foundation? Is there a new situation developing there?

Father Peter Vasko, OFM: There is a great emigration of Christians from the Holy Land. I hear from the Israelis, time and time again: “Well, you know the Christian population is sort of increasing.” But that has to be modified. Last year in Galilee it was a two percent increase. But we are not talking here about native Palestinian Christians. There are 300,000 Russians that camped there, and few thousand of them are Russian Christians. But they don’t usually stay; they emigrate again.

The fact remains that Christians—especially young Christians—are leaving. In the middle of this century 25 percent of the people living in the land of Israel, or the Holy Land, were Christians. Now that figure is under 3 percent. So there is certainly a decline.

A lot of families are coming to us, asking for help: for jobs, for education for their children, for housing. We Franciscan friars, who have been working there for eight hundred years, asked ourselves, “Look, how are we going to help?” We don’t have the money necessary to care for these people and their material needs. The Good Friday collection for Custody of the Holy Land (some of that is taken away from us—35 percent every year) leaves us with very little more than we require for our basic needs. And then we have to face this new problem. So we got together and talked about it with some of the other Christian communities—like the Anglicans, the Lutherans, and the Presbyterians. We were the instigators; we were the ones who spearheaded everything; but we wanted to hear their concerns and their thoughts. Then, after some thoughtful consideration, we decided that the best way to do this was to focus on a national awareness program in the United States through an entity called The Holy Land Foundation.

(It is important to make one note here. We should not be confused with the Holy Land Foundation of Relief and Development, in Richardson, Texas, which people might read about sometimes. That

foundation is controlled by Hamas; it is not ours. We have no association whatever with those people.)

So the Holy Land Foundation was created to provide centers for our young Christian families, to provide projects and programs that might motivate them to remain there—through providing scholarships, through getting them jobs. These young people don’t want to leave. They are being squeezed out because of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinian Muslims.

I read recently that Patriarch Michel Sabbath of Jerusalem said that there will always be a Christian community there. Well, that is true. But that community is declining, and we are concerned. This is where Christ founded the Church; Israel is the cradle of Christianity.

When we say the word “Palestinian,” too many people think of Arafat, and think of terrorism. The word has so many negative connotations! So we are trying to raise the consciousness of people in the West, to get their support for their fellow Christians in the Holy Land. We, as a Church, cannot forget: These people are Christians. They have been here for centuries, maintaining the faith in the place where the Church was born. They don’t want to leave. Yet they are being forced out, due to economic and political circumstances.

Of course you are right; in the United States, when people think of Palestinians, the image that flashes across their minds is that of Arafat. What is the extent of Christian involvement with the new Palestinian authorities?

Vasko: When the West Bank first became autonomous, I remember how Arafat came to the Church of the Nativity and attended the Christmas ceremonies in the Church there. He has spoken very positively of the role of Christian participation in the Palestinian entity. But the fact remains that right now there are 88 members in the Palestinian parliament, and I believe six to eight of them are Christians. That is very logical, because 99 percent of the population on the West Bank is Muslim (the remainder of the Christian population in the Holy Land is scattered around Israel). Still, it remains to be seen what role the Christians can play as a minority in the government. Remember, it is a democracy, and the Muslims have a majority. Obviously, we have an important role to play but it is difficult to predict exactly what the role will be, given the circumstances today.

The latest crisis between Israelis and Palestinians arose when an archeological tunnel was opened in Jerusalem. Can you explain what happened?

Vasko: For eighteen years, the chief archeologist of Jerusalem had been working on this project, extending the tunnel from the Western wall all the way down to the northwest cornerstone of the Temple. The northwest access now comes out above the street, along the Via

Dolorosa, near the Second Station. This tunnel forms part of the tunnel that the Emperor Hadrian had built in 135 AD, to bring water to the Temple Mount.

What happened most recently is that the tunnel was opened up onto the street, so that pilgrims can go back and forth. That is where the problem emerged. The tunnel had been opened once before, about a year ago, but there were some problems then, too, and the government closed it. It was always a controversial situation.

Now, because of the political turmoil—because of the economic misery that the Palestinians have been suffering for such a long time, since the suicide bombings at the beginning of March—I wasn't surprised at all that there was a conflict. When an intolerable situation builds and builds, it has to explode to some way. It could have been anything; it just happened to be the opening of the tunnel that ignited the riots.

There were some rumors reported, among Muslims, that the tunnel was undermining the Dome of the Rock. Was that a factor?

Vasko: I don't know. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the tunnel was going to be opened for the purpose of tourism. He did make a statement admitting that it had been unfortunate timing. But obviously the feelings among the Muslims on this issue are very, very strong. The Temple Mount is also their holy place, and I would guess that their fear comes from the possibility that other tunnels might be built without their knowledge. That, I think, is the concern of the Muslims as far as the Temple Mount is concerned. It is very near to their sacred shrine—too close for comfort—and they are afraid of future archeological excavations.

Also, remember that although these are the holy places of Islam, too, the Palestinian Muslims are not allowed permission to enter the area of the new tunnel. Only Israelis and tourists can pass through.

You mean that all Palestinians are excluded from the tunnel?

Vasko: Well, this is the situation: If you are a Palestinian, it is a concern; perhaps you could be a terrorist. Anybody who looks like an Arab is certainly stopped by the military, to check their papers and their permits. The Israelis are justly afraid that if a Palestinian gets in perhaps he could be a terrorist. So they are not permitted to go inside these places.

The Israeli system of security, in which borders are effectively closed down and people are prevented from going to their places of employment, must constitute a great hardship for the Palestinian people.

Vasko: Yes, it is. It has become routine—obviously, because of security worries. We understand that some security measures are legitimate, and they really must be applied to all people without distinction. But on the other hand we are mindful of the natural dignity of the human person, which is given by God. That dignity cannot be ignored.

This is true especially when you have a case of collective punishment. Where does that lead? The Palestinian and Israeli leaders are now full partners in building the peace here; they are committed to the creation of a new atmosphere of collaboration. Of course there are always going to be some problems, and some opposition to the peace process. But there should be some other way, some new policy that could be worked out, to screen people for security reasons—some policy that could be acceptable to both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

If people are prevented from working, there will be a growing sense of animosity. Doesn't that inevitably cause even greater security concerns?

Vasko: Well, since February 26, 75 to 85 percent of the Palestinian people have been unemployed. The Palestinian national authority is losing \$6 million a day—\$3 million in lost revenue from wages, and \$3 million because of the curtailment of exports to Israel. Over the last five years Israeli firms have been replacing Palestinian workers with 80,000 foreign workers, and in mid-March of this year the Israeli authorities permitted another 16,000 foreign workers to enter the country. So now there are perhaps 100,000 Palestinians without jobs. And remember that each of these Palestinians has, on the average, somewhere around eight or nine dependents. So almost a million people are affected.

Again, I want to stress that I understand the concerns about security. I am in no way saying that we have no problem; there is a problem, there is a need for security. But at what price do we hold a whole nation responsible for ten criminals?

One of the big problems that we are having is education. Most of our teachers live in the West Bank. We have written on March 26 to Prime Minister Netanyahu, on August 12 to Mayor Ohlmert of Jerusalem, on August 12 another letter to the mayor, on August 23 another to Netanyahu—all asking for understanding and help in allowing these teachers to come to work. We have not even received any acknowledgment of any of these letters. The last letter was signed by all the Christian Patriarchs of Jerusalem, including the Custos of the Holy Land. We are saying, "Look, we have twelve schools. They cannot begin their 1996-97 academic year."

We wrote long before the academic year was scheduled to begin, asking for special permits for our teachers who live in the West Bank. Were any of these teachers part of the Hamas militia? Of course none of them were. Teachers usually aren't part of that sort of activity; they are here to educate. And yet over 700,000 students, from primary school to the university, have not been able to continue back to their schools since March. There have been a few breaks in that barrier—a few universities opened up. But overall the children have not been able to receive any education. And the closure is still in effect. The Israeli authorities lifted it for a couple of weeks, but now it is back in place. They did permit maybe 15,000 Palestinians to come back to work in the principal Israeli cities like Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, but still that is a very small number. The concern and the turmoil and the frustration that is being built up could soon explode again in some other area.

How are these people surviving with no jobs? They are not wealthy, obviously.

Vasko: They are *not* surviving! I mean, there are some humanitarian agencies that are giving aid, but the majority of people are suffering. They can't get work and most of the Palestinians, whether Christian or Muslim are simply saying, "We have a right to make a livelihood to feed our family, to have our children educated, and because of this security problem, we are not permitted to do that." So again I ask the question: At what price do we punish an entire nation?

How is the situation of the Christians different from that of the Muslims?

Vasko: We share basically the same fate as the Palestinian Muslims because the people, in the eyes of the Israelis, are all lumped together. They are Palestinians; they don't really differentiate between Muslims and Christians.

As you know, the Vatican recognizes Israel, and there are talks

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going on. We are trying to work together with Israelis and with other Christian leaders. We have that opening. But as far as the general populace goes, if there is a problem, everyone who is not Israeli is Palestinian and they face the same fate.

Is there any tension among Palestinians between Muslims and Christians?

Vasko: On occasion you will find that, but they are isolated incidents. We have had a few occasions where some of our Christian families—say for example in Bethlehem—rent from a Muslim family, and they are told that they cannot put up a crucifix or a holy picture. There were two or three instances where our families were evicted because the Muslim landlord came in and saw a crucifix on the wall. These are signs of prejudice. But it is not rampant. You have extremists in all parties. I think there is a rather good rapport between the Christian leaders and the Muslim leaders, between the Christian people and the Muslim people. Obviously we don't have much of a choice about what happens. We are a minority. The most logical thing is for us to work with the Muslims. There is already an understanding; there is a good rapport with the Palestinian Muslims. They are suffering the same thing.

Elsewhere in the Arab world Islamic fundamentalism has developed a climate of hostility toward Christians. Is some sort of political force visible?

Vasko: It hasn't really erupted—or even really surfaced—at this point. There are isolated incidents but I think the main conflict has been and continues to be between the Israelis and the Palestinian people. I haven't seen attacks against the Christians.

We have been speaking primarily of Palestinians. Are there Christians of other origins in the Holy Land?

Vasko: There are European Christians here, and there are American Christians, but they are a very small part—maybe five hundred all together. It is not much at all. It is basically Palestinians.

Now a question of Historical background. How did these Palestinians become Christians?

Vasko: Well, of course it started way back when Christ founded the Church: they were his followers. Of course, they dispersed all over the world, but at the same time some were also in Jerusalem. There was always a coming and going, departure and arrival of Christians throughout the centuries.

When the Franciscans came in 1216, along the shoreline there were a few hundred Christians. Of course the Franciscans came along with the Crusaders. But when the Crusader Kingdom was ousted in 1291, we Franciscans were the only people allowed to stay. They called us the “friars of the court.” We were the only religious or priests or ministers who were allowed to stay in the Holy Land, together with a handful of Christians. Until 1847, the Franciscan friars maintained the holy sites, and maintained the Christian faith—over all those many years. The Franciscans were responsible for the maintenance of Christianity from 1291 until 1847 when the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

was reestablished.

There are Christian families in the Holy Land today that may go back as far as a thousand years. You don't have records going back before that, but of course at the time of Christ there certainly *was* a presence; some families might go back to that time!

These are what I call the forgotten faithful. The Christian Palestinians are still basically abandoned and ignored, invisible to the Christian West. When the Christian West thinks of the conflict over the Middle East, people think of Israelis versus Muslims, and because Israel is an ally of the United States—and that is quite natural considering the circumstances—Americans, generally speaking, identify with the Israeli government over the Palestinians. All they hear about the Palestinians is that they are terrorists. And that is indirectly affecting the Palestinian Christians.

I think it is a matter of imparting the realization to the people in the United States that the majority of Palestinians are peace-loving people. They are common laborers and they want to live in peace. I would say that most Israelis and most Palestinians want peace. They want to live in peace; they want to get on with their lives.

There was a study made a few years ago by a sociologist at Bethlehem University; he took a survey of 500 people in Christian families, and asked them: “If peace were to come today, would you stay?” Ninety-six percent of them said, “We certainly would stay.” So the peace process is really the key to giving people hope because if there is peace, we can get industries in, we can get corporations in from the West to help ease the economic plight of the Palestinians.

Then too there is the question of foreign aid. Right now the Israelis get \$6 billion in aid from the United States; Egypt gets \$5 billion. The Palestinian national authority now is scheduled to receive \$600 million from the Clinton Administration, but my concern is that very little of that money ever trickles down to the Palestinian Christians. That is for a very logical reason; we are 1 percent of the population, so when money is given it is given proportionately obviously to the Palestinian Muslims. It is not that they are saying, “We're not going to give it to the Christians.” It is a matter of reality that they are the majority, and they control the political process.

When we ask for money from other countries for the Christians, as we have done with the European ambassadors, we are told they cannot give funds to religious sects. Well the European Union is giving millions of dollars to the Palestinians, but the Christians never see any of that money. This is just one of those quirks that occur in the real world.

Now one of the concerns of the Holy Land Foundation is to lobby for some sort of a clause in the US foreign aid program, whereby the money would be proportionately distributed to both Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians. I think we need such a lobbying effort—a Christian lobbying effort to let the people and the politicians know that there are Christians there. In fact, we have found that many politicians were surprised; they didn't even know that there were Christians there; they thought they were all Muslims. Again, this is a matter of not getting the proper information.

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When the Palestinian Christians leave the Holy Land, where do they go?

Vasko: A great many of them go to South America, a lot to Canada, some to Australia, and some to the United States. In fact, in one little town in Chile (I don't know the name) there are more Christians who are originally from Bethlehem than there are Christians in Bethlehem itself!

In Jerusalem in 1940 there were 45,000 Christians. In 1967 there were 28,000 Christians. In 1996 there are under 10,000. Bethlehem was 80 percent Christian thirty-five years ago; it is now 20 percent Christian, and 80 percent Muslim. Ramallah was the city where Mary and Joseph realized that they had left their 12-year-old son in Jerusalem. Sixty thousand Christians have emigrated from Ramallah, and today there are only 6,000 Christians there.

So things are going down, down, down. If we don't provide some motivations and incentives there is a possibility that Christianity will cease to exist here. I suppose that there will always be *some* Christians, but we as Christians need to have a sense of who we are—of our religious roots and heritage. One of the people I was speaking to recently said, "Well, what is so important? Christianity will always exist. You don't have to have Christians in the Holy Land." I answered, "Well, tell me this. What do you say to a Palestinian young man who does not want to leave his country but can't find a job, can't have his children educated, and he is being squeezed out, forced out. What do you say to somebody like that. How do you talk to him?"

Moreover, if the Christian population was to disappear from the Holy Land, then there would be no Church here. There would be only a sort of "museum" presence. A building doesn't represent the Church; it is the people.

You know, without the Church of Jerusalem, there would be no Church in Boston, or New York, or Los Angeles, or London, or Melbourne. Jerusalem is where is the Church began. It is paramount; it is the eternal city. It has to have a special place.

With the Holy Father speaking so much about the dawn of the third Christian millennium, and pointing toward ecumenical encounters in the Holy Land, what are your plans?

Vasko: There is a standing committee that has been set up at the Vatican, and various other subcommittees formed from it, to prepare for the year 2000 in the Holy Land. The Patriarchs are involved in that, and the Franciscans as well. Hopefully the Holy Father—his health permitting—will come to the Holy Land. I think it is an important positive factor in one sense, because a lot of Christian pilgrims will be coming over to celebrate the millennium. It is going to be a very big event. I don't know if there are going to be enough hotels in the city. Most Christians are looking forward to all this, as a boost to our spirituality, to celebrate that very special event. And I think it is also going to be a great boost for the local Christians to see other Christians coming in. We hope by that time there will be some sort of peaceful atmosphere and understanding.

What are the relationships among the different Christian churches, and the different rites within the Catholic Church—in and around Jerusalem?

Vasko: There is a very good rapport among all the Christians. Among the Orthodox there are the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians, the Syrians, and the Copts. Within the Catholic Church we have the Melkites, the Maronites, and the Latin-rite Catholics. We are all very close. Perhaps we have a siege mentality. The fact that our numbers are so small makes us realize that we have to stick together.

When there are issues of injustice, or moral issues that need to be addressed, all the religious heads—all the heads of the groups I have named, along with the Custos of the Holy Land—join to make formal declarations. So there is a great unity; we stand up together in the cause of justice.

There are about 25,000 Roman Catholics and 55,000 Melkite Catholics—altogether, about 80,000 of the faithful in union with Rome. The other 50 percent of the Christians would mostly be members of the Orthodox communions—the Greek, Armenian, Syrian, and Coptic churches. There are about 76,000 Orthodox. Then there are about 4,000 Protestants.

So altogether there are roughly 160,000 Christians. I should quickly add that there is no agreement on that point; there are two or three different notions about how many Christians are living in the Holy Land—by which I mean all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. I have heard numbers ranging from 125,000 to 200,000. I would say that the accurate figure is 160,000, or maybe as high as 170,000, but not more than that.

What can be done to curb the emigration—to ensure the continue existence of a Christian presence in the Holy Land?

Vasko: That really is the most important question. We are trying to help the Christians by creating jobs and housing and scholarships.

We have 75 scholarships, which we give to young people, making sure that they use these scholarships at Bethlehem University—which is their university—or perhaps in neighboring countries such as Jordan. The mistake that many churches make is that we have sent our Christian students to American universities, or European universities, and after they graduated only 1 percent of them come back. Once you are away from the turmoil and everything else, there is a tendency to not want to go back.

We are trying to build a nucleus for the future of the Christians—for the young Christians—who have to remain here. We have fifteen students who are studying to be nurses, educators, and engineers, and in another two years when they complete their studies we will find jobs for them and help them with subsidized housing. We are not in the welfare business, but unless young families can find jobs and housing, how can we expect them to stay?

We help them with subsidized housing which the Franciscans have built in Jericho, in Bethpage, in Bethany, and Bethlehem. So now we have all these young people, and if you could go see them and talk to them, you would find them so very thankful, because they did not want to leave. We gave them an opportunity, thank God, through the generosity of American Catholics, and now they are staying. They are the nucleus. We have to begin somewhere. The Foundation is not going to halt the exodus of Christians from the Holy Land. All we are trying to do is stem the flow. We are looking to set up a nucleus of young Christian people—the future of the Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land. But if we don't do anything for them now, if we don't provide the incentives, if we don't furnish the motivation, we are not going to hold on to them. The Christian Palestinians do not have a voice, they do not have a platform, and they do not have a lobby. We intend to be that voice, that platform, that lobby.

There are a lot of organizations who are doing what they can: the Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre, Catholic Charities, Catholic Near East, the Franciscan custody—but it has not been enough. In order to raise funds you have to raise awareness of the problem, too. ■

By Philip Lawler