

REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLY LAND

By Robert Lentz, OFM

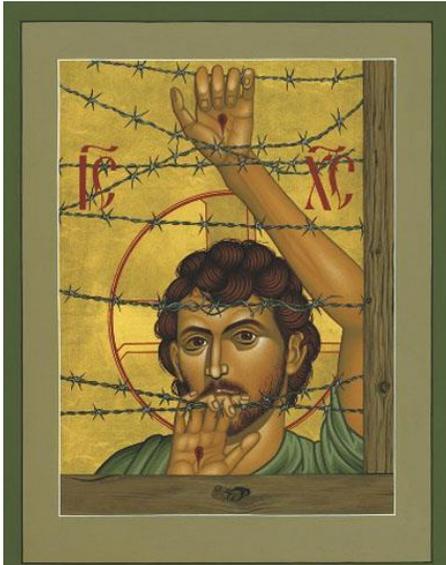
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On May 24-26, 2014 Pope Francis will be making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. With this trip, we have an opportunity to walk in solidarity with our Holy Father and all the peoples of the Holy Land. Solidarity is not simply an emotional feeling of concern; it is both the acknowledgment and strengthening of our relatedness as Children of God. To contemplate and empathize with others' experiences - in order to deepen our relatedness - requires effort.



With our historic connection to the region, we Franciscans invite you to join us in a Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land during this special time. We begin the campaign with a powerful reflection from our brother Robert Lentz, OFM.

It was Sunday morning and we had been standing in line for fifteen minutes, painfully inching our way toward the marble slab that covers the stone on which the dead body of Jesus once laid. The great bell of the basilica began to toll, joined by smaller bells in a joyful peal. The Greek patriarch of Jerusalem was leaving the church of the Holy Sepulcher after Divine Liturgy, surrounded by his people. "I've got to go," I told my fellow pilgrims. "There's too much more to see." I raced out of the church, into the sunlight of the plaza, breathing a sigh of relief. Smiling faces of Palestinian Christians were everywhere, as the bells echoed off the stones of the narrow streets.



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This, in a nutshell, was my experience of the Holy Land: faces, eyes and faces. It's the faces I will remember the rest of my life. The faces are burned into my soul. The ancient stones of the historic buildings were interesting. The stony land taught me much about Jesus and helped bring his words to life for me. All these stones were *dead* stones, however. The Palestinians were *living* stones like those the first letter of Peter describes: "Build yourselves like living stones into a spiritual house . . ."

I cannot imagine the Holy Land without these living stones. It would become a religious theme park, a Christian Disneyland with empty, pious tableaux. For 2000 years Christians have lived in Palestine, since the time of the Apostles. What the Romans, the Persians, the Muslims, and even the Crusaders were unable to do, the state of Israel is finally accomplishing. Now however, every year thousands of native Christians give up the struggle to stay in their homes and immigrate to countries where they can live peacefully. The day may come when their ancient churches will be empty except for pilgrim tourists, and a few foreign clergy caretakers.

Growing up in the American Southwest, Native Americans have been part of my life from early childhood. As we traveled throughout the West Bank and Jerusalem, the plight of the Palestinians reminded me of what Native Americans have endured for two centuries in the creation of the United States. Like Native Americans, Palestinians are in the way of another people who feel they have a right to their land and who often do not even *see* them. They are invisible. They are not human beings with faces. They are a nuisance and an obstacle for the plans to create Greater Israel. They have been driven from much of their land onto small reservations, like Native Americans. There, they live in poverty, without equal protection of the law.

The natives of Palestine are connected to their land in profound ways. For thousands of years, they have engaged in agriculture that respected the land. In contrast, modern Israeli settlements drill wells and pump precious water to create their artificial "promised land."



The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee are drying up. The fragile balance of the desert has been compromised by settlement populations many times too great for the land to sustain.

My experience during our pilgrimage was that most Israelis live in an artificial world that shields them from the harsh realities their world creates. Large red signs forbid them to enter Palestinian areas and Palestinians without travel documents cannot enter Jewish areas. The Israeli government plays on the fears of their people. Walls and security check points isolate Palestinians from Jews. Jews cannot see the faces that inspired me. Palestinians see only hostile Israeli faces patrolling their streets or interrogating them at check points. Without faces, it is easy to hate.

There are grassroots efforts among Christian Palestinians to help people on both sides see human faces once again. Leaders of these groups spoke with us as we traveled through the West Bank. In a seemingly hopeless situation, they refuse to hate. Their hopeful faces will challenge me the rest of my life.

We Franciscans like to be liked. We are the jolly, compassionate religious who show a more human face of the Roman Church. We pride ourselves on centuries of service in the Holy Land. We see ourselves as its



“custodians.” The question I ask myself now is: are we custodians of a pious theme park or are we responsible for churches of *living* stones, whether Orthodox or our own? We who live in the United States are responsible for the way in which our government has been enabling the state of Israel to carry out its policies of military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As we traveled, I could not help but realize that our tax dollars have been implicated in the building of the Separation Wall and the construction of the illegal, Jewish-only settlements in the Palestinian West Bank. Our government gives a huge military and diplomatic support to the state of Israel while turning a blind eye to how such unqualified support contributes to the unjust policies that humiliate Palestinians, drive them from their homes and undermines the long-term interests and wellbeing of the Jewish people and their desire for security and peace. When we are silent and do not speak up, do we deserve the affection people lavish upon us?

More than anything else, each of us can do something to ensure that Palestinian faces are *seen*. If confronting Washington seems too daunting, we can do what we do so well: talk. We can help tell Palestinian stories that Israeli propoganda wants to hide. We can invite visiting Palestinian speakers to our churches and communities so that they can tell us their own stories. Seeing human faces is the only way the walls of fear and hatred will fall in Israel. We must do all we can to show Palestinian faces once again to Israelis and to the rest of the world as well.

What can you do?

Learn more about the challenges and hopes of the people of Palestine and Israel. The movie *My Neighbourhood* is an excellent resource. *My Neighbourhood* chronicles the story of Mohammed El Kurd, a Palestinian teenager forced to share a section of his house with Israeli settlers. Mohammed comes of age in the midst of unrelenting tension with his neighbors and unexpected cooperation with Israeli allies in his backyard.

The movie is available for free download at <http://www.justvision.org/myneighbourhood/watch>

Churches for Middle East Peace offers a wonderful reflection tool for use with the movie: http://cmep.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20REV_My%20Neighbourhood_H.pdf

