

Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference

Rome, 11- 13 April 2016

Injustice in the name of God in Palestine

The response of the Church

In 1917, Arthur Balfour issued a declaration promising the Jews a state in Palestine. According to history, Balfour was motivated by his religious convictions that Palestine belongs to the Jews as fulfillment of the biblical prophecies in the Old Testament. The Zionist movement began as a secular national movement, but after the creation of the State of Israel, religious Jews joined the movement with the pretext that this land was promised to them by God; expelling the indigenous population was a necessity to create the “Jewish State”. The settlement movement began in the 70s as a religious national Jewish movement; they called the Palestinian occupied territories with the biblical name: Judea and Samaria. They gave settlements biblical names: Shilo, Beit El, Alon Moreh, Levona... The Bible was their “document of ownership” of the land. Today, both national and religious parties in Israel are convinced that the Palestinian occupied territories belong to Israel by divine promises, and the Palestinians have no national rights, and very limited, if any, personal rights.

Many Christians joined this religious vision. They affirm that “the return of Jews to their land is a sign of the faithfulness of God toward his people”. Many western Christians rejoiced in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel as the fulfillment of the promises of God, such as Jeremiah 23, 3: *“Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply.”* And many Christians still celebrate the occupation of Jerusalem as “the unification of Jerusalem”, in June every year.

From the Palestinian perspective, the Nakba (Catastrophe) of our people can never be part of God’s plan, and an injustice done one people or a group can never be corrected with an injustice to another people. The God we believe in is the God of Jesus Christ, the one, loving, just God; creator of all human beings at his image the resemblance.

The response of the Church

The church in the Holy Land expressed its pastoral care through its institutions. The Pontifical Mission for Palestine was created in 1952 to help the Palestinian refugees; the Christian schools are present in every parish; the Christian charitable organizations are open to help the most needy and vulnerable in society: orphanages, houses for the elderly and the handicapped, and many other institutions.

Education takes the priority in the work of the church. Through education, the church empowers young people, teaches the values of the Gospel and spreads its message of salvation. The educational institutions include Christians and non-Christians as well. The values of justice, peace, coexistence and non-violence are the basic values of the schools and universities.

Theologically, the pastoral letters of the former Patriarch of Jerusalem, Mgr. Michel Sabbah, addressed those issues, especially in his pastoral letter in 1993: "Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible". The Christian Palestinians continues to reflect on the Word of God to read the signs of time and to identify the plan of God for his children. The Kairos Palestine document represents a milestone in the Palestinian reflection on the non-violence¹.

In the Kairos document, we affirm our faith in God the father of all the human beings (2.1.), in Jesus Christ who fulfills the promises of the Old Testament and who came with "a new teaching" (Mk 1:27), casting a new light on the Old Testament, on the themes that relate to our Christian faith and our daily lives, themes such as the promises, the election, the people of God and the land" (2.2.2.), and in the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand Holy Scripture (2.1.2.). In order to understand the Word of God as "Good News" for everyone, the document insists on the unity of the Old and New Testaments (2.1.2), the Christological reading of the Old Testament, and on the universal mission of the land (2.3.).

After speaking of faith and hope, the commandment of love is understood as resisting the evil of occupation, as *"The aggression against the Palestinian people which is the Israeli occupation, is an evil that must be resisted. It is an evil and a sin that must be resisted and removed (4.2.1.). We explain the resistance of evil as "a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy. Seeing the image of God in the face of the enemy means taking up positions in the light of this vision of active resistance to stop the injustice and oblige the perpetrator to end his aggression and thus achieve the desired goal, which is getting back the land, freedom, dignity and independence (4.2.3.). This resistance should be a non-violent one; its object "is not revenge but rather to put an end to the existing evil, liberating both the perpetrators and the victims of injustice. The aim is to free both peoples from extremist positions of the different Israeli governments, bringing both to justice and reconciliation" (4.2.6.).*

The Kairos Palestine document became the Magna Carta of the Christian Palestinians from different churches to participate in non-violent resistance. Many other Palestinians join the same vision in the struggle to correct the injustice done to the Palestinians and to achieve the goal of justice, peace and reconciliation to all the inhabitants of the Holy Land, Palestinians and Israelis, Christian, Muslims and Jews. That is how the name of God, often used and abused to justify injustice, can be glorified, and our faith in the same God can contribute positively to end the conflict.

¹ <http://kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf>