



*Christmas*  
*Alert*

2018

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”

*(Luke 2:1-2:1, NIV)*

*New Hope for Palestine, the Middle East & the World*



## **Advent and Christmas Alert 2018**

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# Christmas Message from Bethlehem 2018

*The angel said to the shepherds: "I bring you good tidings that will spread great joy to all people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*

*(Luke 2:11)*

Christ was born in Bethlehem. For two thousand years, prayers and carols have been offered in Bethlehem, and every year joy is renewed in people's hearts. Today in 2018, Bethlehem celebrates the event, glorifies God, prays, and rejoices. Yet its rejoicing is incomplete. There is no joy in the hearts of its people, in the city or in the surrounding refugee camps because the city is still denied its dignity and freedom, and is cut off by the separation wall from the city of Jerusalem, its city of faith and worship, its spiritual and political capital.

Today, Christmas in Bethlehem consists of prayers to God to "Look down from heaven and see" (Isaiah 63:15) and have mercy.





Christmas in Bethlehem is a call to look at Bethlehem and behold the occupants for whose sake the savior was born, those who still live under occupation and the oppression of others, those who are still denied their freedom, dignity, and independence. This is a call to all who espouse justice and peace to allow the people of Bethlehem to rejoice at Christmas by working for the restoration of dignity, freedom, and independence.

Brothers and sisters, we address this Advent/Christmas message to you this year under the title, “New hope for Palestine, the Middle East and the World.” There are four meditations in our message: Refugees in the Middle East, Building Bridges not Walls, New Hope for Palestine, and Light in the Darkness. Following each meditation, you are invited to Reflect, Pray and Act.

“New hope,” despite the cruelty of human against human, regardless of wars and ongoing death and hatred in the land of God. Indeed, because death is commanding hearts and injustice is escalating, we need new light and hope to come from the hearts of all believers in the Christmas message. Then the joy of Christmas will be fully realized

in Bethlehem, where God's mystery still touches the Earth alongside human oppression and the pain of the oppressed. New hope is inherent in people of goodwill to whom angels referred in their hymn in the skies above Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of goodwill." (Luke 2:14) People of goodwill are those who seek peace for all without exception, those who believe that the land of God is no place for murderers but is a land whose people make peace. When people are denied peace, they seek to restore and protect it as a witness to all peoples of the earth at Christmas.

Every Christmas reminds us of the real nature of our country, its mission and message. It is the land of God where there is no place for people of war, irrespective of their earthly vision, policies, weapons or power to kill. Peace on earth and new hope are for peacemakers who deserve to be called the children of God: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." (Mathew 5:9)

In Christmas we see the word of Eternal God: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14) He lived with us and taught us the new commandment, "That ye love one another as I have loved you." He loved and cured the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. He carried new hope to all willing to listen to him.

Today in Bethlehem and in all of Palestine and Israel, Jesus Christ looks at the poor and oppressed and brings them hope. Today, he stands before the separation wall and offers a commandment of love and power that, alone, can remove walls, grant security and safety, and guide the hearts of the aggressors to stop their attacks and end the occupation they impose.

You who believe in Christmas, stand today with Jesus in the face of the occupation and the wall. Think of what you can do to remove the wall and end the occupation, which is the oppression of one people over another, so that the joy of Christmas may return fully to Bethlehem and to all the earth.

Those who celebrate Christmas know that God is love, not a god of armies and wars, nor a god who orders one people to oppress another, or a god that strips one people of their land and gives it to another people.

Christmas is also a day for refugees. Jesus was born outside of the city, not in a home but nearby in a cave. He took refuge in Egypt as a child when he escaped the oppression of the powerful of that time. Jesus walks today among the crowds of refugees; he walks with them and for them, teaching, healing, granting life, and directing the attention of the strong to stop killing and displacing people. Jesus tells the leaders of this world, Relinquish your arms and stop dipping your bread in the blood of the people of the Middle East. Sheathe your swords and turn them into tools for life, as the prophet said. "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4)

New hope in Palestine and the Middle East cannot be realized by the gods of the earth but rather by the poor, those who resist evil while hungry for righteousness, justice, and freedom.

New joy and hope for Palestine will be joy and hope for all the holy land, for Palestine and Israel, when all will be able to see the glory of God who, on Christmas Eve, appeared to the common people and went unseen by those in authority (Luke 2:9). By seeing the glory of God, we are able to love and build a holy land in the image of God where there is no oppressor or oppressed, no walls, no occupation, no darkness, but rather a great light and love that fills the hearts of all.

From Bethlehem, I wish you an Advent and Christmas full of holiness, of justice and love.

*Merry Christmas!*

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*H.B. Patriarch Michel Sabbah served as the Archbishop and Latin (Roman Catholic) Patriarch Emeritus of Jerusalem from 1987 to 2008. Patriarch Sabbah was ordained a priest for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in June 1955. He was a parish priest for a few years before being sent to the University of St. Joseph in Beirut to study Arabic language and literature. Shortly thereafter, he became director of schools for the Latin Patriarchate. In 1980, he was named President of Bethlehem University. In 1987, Pope John Paul II appointed him Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, making him the first native Palestinian to hold the office for centuries. Since 1999, Patriarch Sabbah has been the International President of Pax Christi, a Catholic organization promoting peace. Sabbah resigned as Patriarch in 2008. He is currently the Grand Prior of the Chivalric Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, one of the knightly orders founded in 1099. Patriarch Sabbah is a co-author of the Kairos Palestine Document and believes in pluralism and equality in order to preserve the dignity of human beings.*

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First Sunday  
*in Advent*

# *Challenging Palestinian Displacement and Dispossession*

**By Amjad Alqasis**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), the situation in the Middle East remains volatile. After more than six years of conflict in Syria, there are over five million Syrian refugees in the region and beyond. Violence and instability in countries such as Iraq, Libya and Yemen are triggering new waves of displacement. Countries which are not directly affected by displacement, like Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey, are host countries to millions of refugees.

In addition to the overall situation in the Middle East, this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba, the displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. At the beginning of the 20th century, most Palestinians lived inside the borders of “historic” or “Mandate Palestine”, now the state of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip). Five major periods of forcible displacement or forced population transfer transformed Palestinians into one of the largest and the longest-standing unresolved refugee cases in the world.

Today, Palestinian society is highly fragmented and scattered all around the Middle East and the world. Its social fabric has been torn as a result of this mass forced displacement. Palestinian culture and way of life are highly intertwined with the effects of forced displacement. Even within the occupied Palestinian territory almost half the Palestinians are forcibly displaced persons. In addition to physical and psychological trauma, it is important to consider that a person who fell victim to forced displacement has often fled his or her home with few belongings in hand. Throughout the last decades and constant “waves” of forcibly displaced

persons, the Palestinian “host society” has been challenged to integrate and accommodate huge numbers of their own population within their social, economic and political system. The near impossibility of this task, given the reality of living under military occupation since 1967, is easy to imagine. Today Palestinians, whether displaced or not, share a common history and heritage of displacement. Many Palestinian academics even argue that Palestinian culture has transformed into a culture of forced displacement. This idea is encapsulated by Mahmoud Dawish’s poem:

*The exiles don't look back when leaving  
one place of exile - for more exile  
lies ahead, they've become familiar  
with the circular road, nothing to the front  
or to the rear, no north or south.  
They emigrate from the fence to the garden,  
leaving behind a will with each step across the yard  
of the house:  
'After we're gone, remember only this life.'*



## Challenging displacement and dispossession

In times of overshadowing political decisions like the US administration's cut of its funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and cutting off funding to Palestinian hospitals, it is important to highlight a rights-based approach to end the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinians. In fact, the ongoing disrespect for international law in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict undermines the very legitimacy of this crucial body of legal instruments, in particular human rights, humanitarian law and international criminal law. Therefore, a solution to the ongoing displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people should be found through a strict rights-based approach. Such rights are not guaranteed through political negotiations, but through full adherence to and implementation of international law and rights.



A rights-based approach can be best described as normatively based on international rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting those rights. Simply speaking, peace cannot be recognized when fundamental human rights and freedoms are violated. In the case of Palestine, this approach would entail solutions based on international law rather than a reliance on political negotiations to bring about a long lasting and just solution. In this light, it should be unacceptable to refer to the illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory as “undermining efforts towards peace” – as is regularly the case in political circles – while in reality these settlements constitute a violation of numerous international standards and principles. As such, they represent a manifestation of Israel’s ongoing impunity, and therefore the implementation of international law and standards should not be subject to negotiations, but demanded from the outset. Such a solution would necessarily include the recognition of rights of all involved parties, in particular the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and the right of refugees and internally displaced persons to reparation (voluntary return, property restitution and/or compensations).



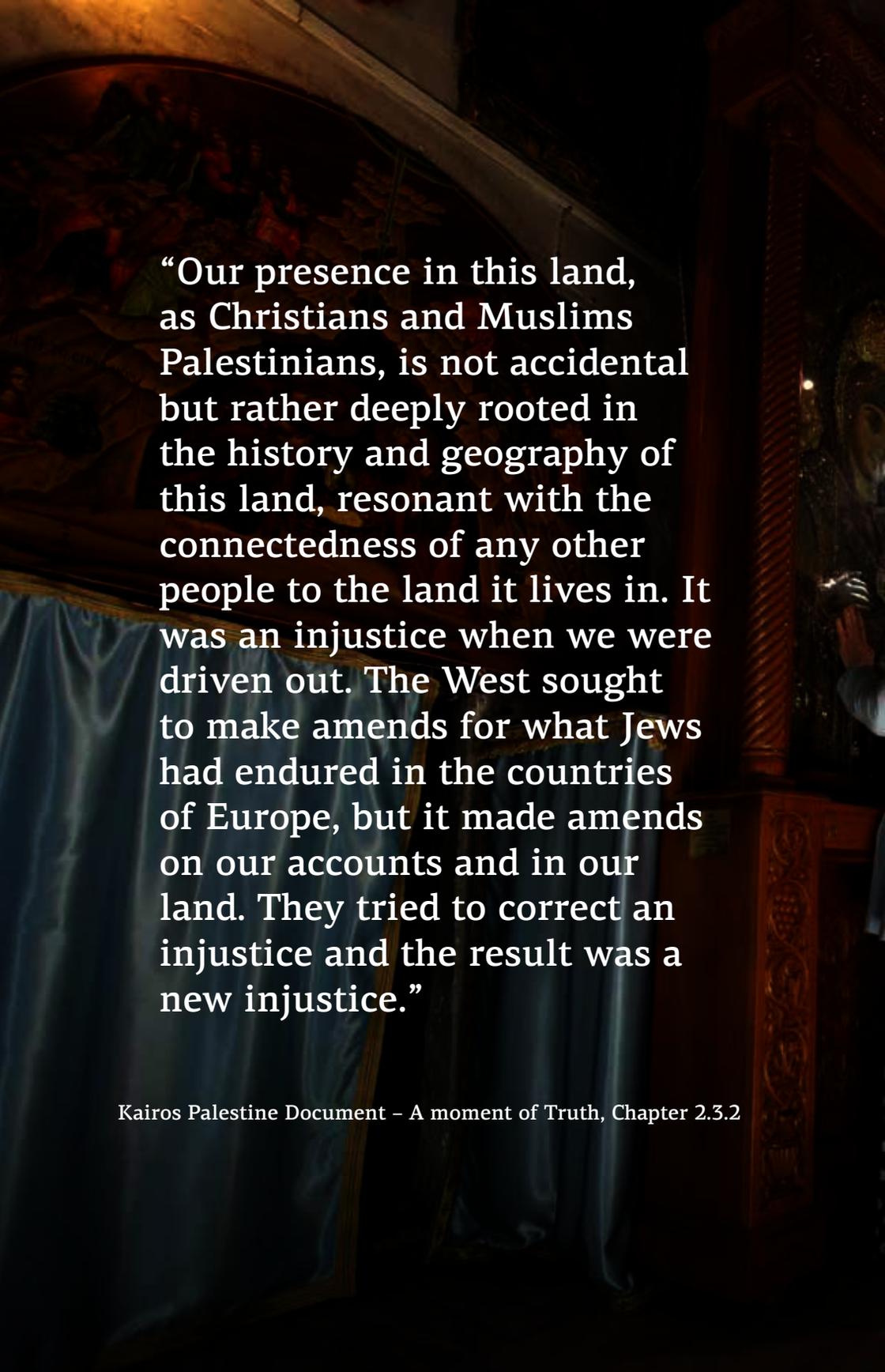
*Amjad Alqasis holds an LLM in international public law and is a human rights lawyer, legal researcher, and a member of the Legal Support Network of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. Previously he was the coordinator of BADIL’s international and legal advocacy program. Since August 2014, Amjad has been an adviser at Al-Haq Center for Applied International Law. He has published several articles and research papers on various topics concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.*



**Reflect:** Imagine being forced to leave your home, your community. What would you take with you? What memories would you cherish?

**Pray:** Holy One Incarnate, I remember that as a child you were spirited off to a distant and unfamiliar place. Be with all those who are suffering as refugees, longing for home as well as food and shelter and a future for their children. So be it, in Jesus' name.

**Act:** This week, find out and share in what ways your faith community is helping to relieve the suffering of refugees. Learn more about Israel's incarceration of Palestinian children ("No Way to Treat a Child"; [www.nwttac.dci-palestine.org](http://www.nwttac.dci-palestine.org)).



“Our presence in this land, as Christians and Muslims Palestinians, is not accidental but rather deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land, resonant with the connectedness of any other people to the land it lives in. It was an injustice when we were driven out. The West sought to make amends for what Jews had endured in the countries of Europe, but it made amends on our accounts and in our land. They tried to correct an injustice and the result was a new injustice.”





Second Sunday  
*in Advent*

# *The Israeli Nationality Law from a Christian Perspective*

**By Boutros Mansour**

[Ed. Note: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, informally known as the Nation-State Bill or the Nationality Bill, is a recently passed Israeli Basic Law which specifies the nature of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.]

## **Salt and Light**

Those who treat their Christian faith as merely a spiritual issue devoid of any application in real life are mistaken, as are those who isolate the spiritual dimension of their faith and focus primarily on the needs and interactions of daily life.

God gave believers two meaningful examples to clarify the need to combine both pillars of spirituality and practicality: salt and light.

By reflecting the light of Christ, we illuminate the way for sinners. We season the dish through our role in society and in protecting the world from corruption, just as salt serves in our daily life.

Thus, our actions should stem from our convictions and references to the Holy Book when it comes to laws that have a serious influence on people's lives in our country, such as the Nationality Law enacted by the Israeli Knesset in mid-July this year.

The main challenges posed by this infamous law are its content, items absent from it, and its status with regard to other legislation of the Israeli state.

## Content

At the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, a Declaration of Independence was issued and signed by figures from all Zionist Jewish groups. In addition to announcing the establishment of the state of Israel as a Jewish state, the document also declared the adoption of democratic principles (without referring to the term democracy) such as equality, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship, language, education and culture, while guaranteeing suitable representation for non-Jews in the state.

Although the Declaration of Independence was not granted official legal status, it is adhered to by the courts, particularly Israel's Supreme Court, and laws have been interpreted on the basis of its enlightened principles. In 1992, the Israeli legislature used the Declaration of Independence to endorse the ethos of a Jewish democratic state in two basic laws: the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty, and the Basic Law on Freedom of Occupation.



Some provisions in the Nationality Law underline general features of the state that existed from the outset like the design of the flag, the national anthem, and so on. Other provisions go further by declaring that the right to self-determination in the country is solely for Jews. Another provision demoted the status of Arabic from an official language to a “language with a special status.” Another provision declared that the state would promote Jewish settlement in the country. (A proposed provision to limit the construction of settlements to specific national or religious groups was abandoned.)

## **The status of a basic law**

Most countries have constitutions that declare general principles governing the state such as the separation of religion from the state, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, etc. Israel is an exception like Great Britain. The leaders of Jewish groups did not agree on the establishment of the state based on the contents of a constitution. Religious Jewish leaders alleged that the Torah is the natural constitution of the Jewish people, but secular Jews insisted that the principles of western freedom should be included in a constitution of the nascent Jewish state.

The parties came to an agreement whereby no constitution would be adopted, but the Knesset would enact basic laws on a variety of topics to form chapters in a future constitution. As these special laws are of a constitutional nature, they are considered superior to ordinary laws and their provisions govern the way judges interpret ordinary laws. The Supreme Court can abrogate legislation (including laws enacted by the Knesset) if it contradicts a basic law.

## **Democratic and Jewish at the same time**

The democratic and Jewish nature of the state was defined prior to the enactment of the Nationality Law. The Supreme Court has attempted to strike a balance in its judgment of cases between the democratic nature of the state and its Jewish character. To date the Supreme Court has been known for the liberal line adopted by its judges, of whom Aharon Barak, the former Chief Justice, was the most influential. These judges gave the democratic aspect precedence in

many cases (mainly in internal Israeli issues rather than in cases related to the West Bank, East Jerusalem or Gaza).

For example, an appeal was submitted to the Supreme Court against the Central Elections Commission regarding the barring of the Democratic National Assembly party from taking part in Knesset elections due to its manifesto calling for Israel to be changed from a Jewish (democratic) state to a “state for all its citizens.” The Court discussed which aspect of the state should be given precedence, since the Jewish nature of the state conflicts with calls for the nature of the state to be changed to a “state for all its citizens. Such opinions should be heard if democracy takes precedence. Ultimately, the Court ruled in favor of allowing the Democratic National Assembly to participate in the elections (civil appeal 09/561).

## **Tightening the grip of right-wing exclusionism**

This and similar rulings that favored the democratic nature of the state angered nationalist and/or religious right-wing leaders in the Knesset and the government. These leaders waited for the opportunity to take a decisive decision to strengthen the Jewish state, so the Nationality Law came as no surprise. Right-wing parties from the Likud to the Jewish Home party all espoused extreme legislation against Arabs and the Left in general to serve an exclusionist right-wing and racist trend. Even the limited political sphere permitted to Arabs was attacked through laws against the boycott movement (BDS) and against the commemoration of the Nakba.

The Israeli right wing does not feel it has consolidated its grip on the country despite the rise to power of the Likud party over the past 40 years (apart from a short period of time of no more than seven years in total during which the government was headed by Rabin, Peres, and Barak). Although the right wing holds power, left and centrist parties control the media, including the TV, prompting Netanyahu to tackle this situation. He was involved in cases of corruption



in which he offered the owner of Yediot Ahronot newspaper and the Walla web portal to modify their line and give him support in return for economic privileges. Efforts have also been exerted to modify the liberal line that has dominated in the Supreme Court.

The right wing wants to replace constitutional laws with laws like the Nationality Law that reinforce right-wing exclusionist policy. It also seeks to replace judges in the Supreme Court with the appointment of those who favor right-wing Jewish policies via the selection committee. The last appointment of judges in February 2017 included several conservative right-wing judges to the Supreme Court, including Judge Mintz, a settler in the West Bank who joined another settler, Supreme Court judge Noam Solberg. The Nationality Law will influence legal interpretations giving precedence to the Jewish nature of the state over its 'democratic' nature.

The long-term strategic goal is to facilitate the enactment of laws that are discriminatory against Arabs and judges will be forced to interpret the law in favor of the extreme Jewish right wing.

## **Palestinian reservations**

Despite strong reservations among Palestinian residents of Israel with regard to this law, some believe that there should not be protests against it because this would indicate that full Israeli citizenship is an objective rather than Palestinian nationalism. To protest would be to materially accept the Jewish nature of the state with a simple demand for equal civil rights.

## **Distorted theology drives the Nationality Law**

It is deplorable that those who support these racist laws that contradict the Christian message are Jews and Christians who interpret the Old Testament texts literally to affirm the “right of Jews” on the land, ignoring the texts’ temporal and spatial context. Many Christians espouse a heretical interpretation of “the last days/end of times,” which in turn supports a right-wing, racist Zionist agenda. They ignore large sections of the Old Testament that support the oppressed, widows and orphans, in addition to key aspects in the New Testament such as the Sermon on the Mount. As a result, they adhere to a distorted interpretation that is detrimental to the rights of Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

Equality and justice are manifested in the criteria by which God interacted with the human race from day one until now. In the first stage, Genesis, God created human being in God’s own image. The significance of men and women created in the image of God is the basis for human rights and for humankind’s great worth. How can one reflect the image of God and be treated with discrimination, injustice, oppression, and suppression?

In the second stage, the Old Testament prophets, God sent spokespersons to call people to repent their sins. One of the abhorrent sins which God repeatedly prohibited is injustice (i.e., Deuteronomy 16:20 and Psalm 11:7).

In the third stage, the New Testament, righteousness is pivotal to the Christian faith. God bestows righteousness on the faithful to replace the sin that befouled life. The term “righteousness” is properly translated as “justice.” The divine work of God for humankind’s salvation is the realization of justice in accordance with the requirements of divine justice through the love of God on the cross. Thus, how can belief in this central and pivotal creed be reconciled with ignoring the need for justice anywhere in the human race?



The fourth stage, also in the New Testament: At a time when discrimination is escalating between men and women, between Jews and gentiles and, of course, between masters and their slaves, the New Testament states in unequivocal terms that they have equal status under the Christian faith. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Christians must inevitably oppose exclusionist thought that turns our eternal omnipotent God into a god for one tribe or for one people over others. God cannot be thus.

The ethos of the Nationality Law can be opposed by faithful men and women standing together to support our people with unrestrained voices because if the Son of God liberated us, in fact we are free. This can be achieved in the following ways:

1. Raising awareness through lectures, seminars, workshops and publications.
2. Addressing Jewish and foreign supporters to request their support.
3. Exposing and embarrassing supporters of this and similar laws to unmask their double standards of behavior and their claims of democracy while they fail to comply with its components.

Appeal to international bodies such as the UN and the International Court that condemn regimes that discriminate against national minorities.



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**Reflect:** To what resources do you turn when, serving others and working toward a just world, you get discouraged? To what concrete and practical acts of love and service will your spiritual resources lead and empower you today?

**Pray:** God, when I don't have the words to pray, hear my sighs. But let neither my words nor my sighs keep me from rising up to love and serve you by loving and serving others. In the name of the One who in the garden prayed, "Thy will, not mine." Amen.

**Act:** If you are not actively participating in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, learn more about it this week ([www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net)). If you are participating, share the reasons for your BDS passion with a friend.

# *The Deeper Meaning and Expression of Christmas*

by Bishop Attalah Hanna

We are preparing to celebrate the glory of Christmas. Our churches celebrate the birth of the savior who came to this world to spread the values of love, our common humanity, mercy and peace.

Christ did not incarnate in this world merely to establish a community. He came to call the whole of humanity to love because God is love and when love fades from our life we lose our real Christian values.

Christmas is not a religious occasion simply for trees to be lit and streets and houses to be decorated. Christmas cannot be reduced to decorations, gifts, and lights lit here and there. The real illumination of the feast is the virtue that we practice in our spiritual life. This is how we actually celebrate Christmas.



While many reduce the feast to a mere celebratory show, the feast should be accompanied by expressions of the virtues of love and mercy towards our brothers and sisters, especially the tormented, oppressed and imprisoned who suffer injustice, persecution, and tyranny.

The tragedies that our people have experienced since 1948 have rendered many of them homeless, having been displaced from their neighborhoods and villages. Palestinian refugees live in refugee camps scattered across many countries. Palestinians everywhere are prevented from returning to their homeland by the strict laws imposed by the occupying power on the return of Palestinian refugees.

In the Arab World, we see disasters caused by wars, violence, terror and killing. The Syrian tragedy confronts us as millions of Syrians have been displaced and the massive destruction of the country continues.

As Christians, we stand in solidarity with the displaced and the victims of war who have been subjected to violence and often death in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and all over the world. Our wounds as Palestinians cannot make us forget our brethren who are also suffering due to instability, war and violence and the world over.



At Christmas we stand with the Palestinian refugees and all our Palestinian people who have been subjected to injustice. We stand in solidarity with the displaced, and with the victims of terror and violence in our Arab Orient for they are the little brothers and sisters of Jesus. We love and always pray for them.

Peace is absent from the city of Jerusalem as the result of the acts perpetrated against its holy places, endowments and people. Before our eyes, apartheid walls separate Jerusalem from Bethlehem and from other Palestinian governorates, cities, and towns.

Peace cannot be achieved in the absence of justice. Peace cannot be achieved by racist walls that separate one human from another. Peace needs bridges of love, community and communication.

Palestinian refugees have the right to demand to return to their homeland. The right of return cannot be rescinded by order and is not subject to a law of limitations. We believe that this right is at the heart of the Palestinian problem. When we refer to Jerusalem and its status, or Palestine and the importance of its independence, we should highlight the problem of Palestinian refugees and their inalienable right to return to their homeland. Palestine belongs to its sons and daughters, and every Palestinian should enjoy a return to one's own homeland.

We send our greetings to all those celebrating Christmas and pray at the Grotto of the Nativity for justice to be realized in Palestine, the Holy Land, especially in the city of Jerusalem, and for peace to prevail in our Arab Orient.

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*Bishop Atallah Hanna was born on 6/11/1965 in the town of Al Rama in the Upper Galilee. After finishing high school in Al Rama in 1983 he joined the Orthodox Seminary in Jerusalem. In 1984 he left to Thessaloniki in Greece where he studied Greek and then joined the College of Theology at the Thessaloniki University from which he graduated with distinction in 1990. He was ordained a monk in 1990 at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. He contributed to the development of the unified curriculum for Christian religion teaching at Palestinian schools. Archbishop Hanna participated in many local, regional and international conferences and advocated for the Palestinian question in all forums. He is a member of many committees and organizations in addition to his membership in several Christian and ecumenical institutions. He played a role in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. He was elected unanimously as the Archbishop of Sebastia in 2005.*

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“We say that our option as Christians in the face of the Israeli occupation is to resist. Resistance is 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.”





Third Sunday  
*in Advent*

# *New Hope for Palestine*

**By Fr. Bashar Fawadleh**

In the suffering, bloodstained world of today, our Arab world in particular suffers from hopelessness and alienation as it pursues actions that carry it from one rationale to another. From the rationale of peace to one of war. From the rationale of discourse to one of killing and destruction. Palestinian Christians are not isolated from these difficult living conditions. Rather, they are at the heart of this critical and dangerous political atmosphere which does not promote a life of hope but marginalizes humankind and plants frustration in hearts, leading to war instead of peace, and giving priority to personal interests over the general public interest.

This painful reality requires every Christian believer in God, righteousness, and in all forms of freedom, justice, and peace, to pause and ask: Why war? What is the objective behind it? Where is the discourse of love which should take precedence? Where is hope? What is the meaning of hope? Is there hope? And is there still a place for a hope to survive under the occupation and the scenario of strong and weak? And is it still meaningful to place our hope in God who is not subject to the actions of the world? Has hope become a characteristic only of the weak?

## **Our reality today**

In the face of the difficult conditions in the Arab world in which pressures are exerted on every front, people, particularly Christians, are prone to despair. They are losing hope as they feel powerless. The events in the Arab world have diminished hope and raise major questions about the present and future of Arab countries. As Palestinians and Christians, we must retain hope despite all the difficulties that face us. Our societies need hope. We as Christians should assert this hope for ourselves and our society in order to become true witnesses of Christ who rose from the dead. If hopelessness becomes embedded, then we fall into a state of

inactivity, lethargy and death, although we are called upon to live and give life (John 10:10). We are called upon to live in hope, assert it and share it with those around us.

This critical political situation and the feelings of fear, worry, and confusion it creates in the hearts of Christians in Palestine and in the Arab world dominates our Christian existence and presence on this land. We were born in Jerusalem and our roots are here. If we were to abandon them, we would be cutting ourselves off from our origins. This divine choice is not random. It stems from the love of God for us. God honored us to deliver a specific message for which we were given responsibility since the inception of the first Christians in Jerusalem and the beginning of the church. This message: we are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in his homeland; we are the living stones that adorn the stonework of the holy places that would turn into cold museums and dead antiquities without us.

## **The church of Jerusalem**

We should be aware that the church of Jerusalem is the church of Golgotha, which means that believers are deeply engaged in the secret of the cross and the pain that was fulfilled on this earth. We cannot escape the cross of the difficult political situation. We must stand firmly with faith and hope at the feet of the cross, just as the beloved Mary and John did as faithful disciples, to contemplate the great mystery of the Lord in the belief and hope that our church is also the church of resurrection and victory over death. The cross, pain and death were unavoidable “evil” that led to the resurrection and eternal life, to righteousness and freedom that released all the chains of evil that restrain us. We, the people of the holy land, the people of the resurrection, are convinced that all adversities and disasters are only trials and fire that test our belief. This is our hope that will take us closer to the presence of the Lord. “He has given us a new birth into a living hope... so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine.” (1 Peter 1:3, 7)

In his book in Arabic (Sudasiya Leazmena Jadeda), Father Rafeeq Khoury states that a Christian Palestinian can adopt one of two positions to counter his/her difficult political state under the occupation. The first position is the easier since it is to surrender and submit. This stance has a pessimistic outlook on reality as it does not identify any ray of hope to extract oneself from this difficult situation. This is the realism of defeat, a paralysis that keeps us static and develops frustration and leads to surrender. The second position recognizes the difficulty of the reality but understands and adapts to it based on Jesus's experience of the cross and the hope manifested in the resurrection. It seeks to discover God within the reality and seeks to know God's will. This is called creative realism. This realism in Jesus Christ enabled him to fulfill his Father's will for the salvation of humanity. The time in which we live is not a time of fear, complaint, or escape. Rather it is a time of hope.



## **The church of anticipation and hope**

The church lives today in indescribable pain, as in every phase of its long history. The church of the first centuries was an oppressed church that offered no way out but martyrdom. We recall, as well, the Milan Decree in which Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion, the Islamic era which saw both persecution and coexistence, the major split in the church which undermined its vision of hope, the events of the Middle Ages and Western divisions, the modern ages that embodied wars, killing, destruction, occupation and the usurpation of land. Father Khoury says in this regard: “In each of these stages, the church found itself facing a dire adversity, that is to say an Easter situation that demands death to pay for the past and discovery of the seeds of life in what is to come, between what has died and what is yet to see light, between what has been achieved or not, between planting and harvest, between the labor pains and the joy of birth... this church is the church of anticipation and hope. Anticipation is an Easter component par excellence, which makes it hope par excellence, a hope that the seed of wheat that died in the earth will produce ears that will fill the universe with its fertility and fruit.”



## **A church and a homeland**

We cannot separate the hope of our church and the hopes of the universe, humanity and our homeland Palestine. We must seek assistance in what Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans:

“All of creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed. It was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of Him who imposed it with the intention that all of creation might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God. We are well aware that all of creation has, until this time, been groaning in the pain of labor. And we too, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning internally, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. In hope, we already have salvation; the hope is not visibly present, or we should not be hoping as nobody goes on hoping for something which is already visible. But having this hope for what we cannot yet see enables us to wait for it with confidence.” (Romans 8:18-25)

Saint Paul does not separate the hope of the Christian community, the church, from the hopes of the world and humanity in general because the church does not exist for itself but for the whole world. As Christ says: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18) The church was planted in this world for the salvation of the world. It adopts the hopes of the world and its aspirations; it supports humanity in its prayers and raises it to the throne of God. From here, from Palestine, the mother of all beginnings, hope was born, and from here salvation reached to the far ends of the world.

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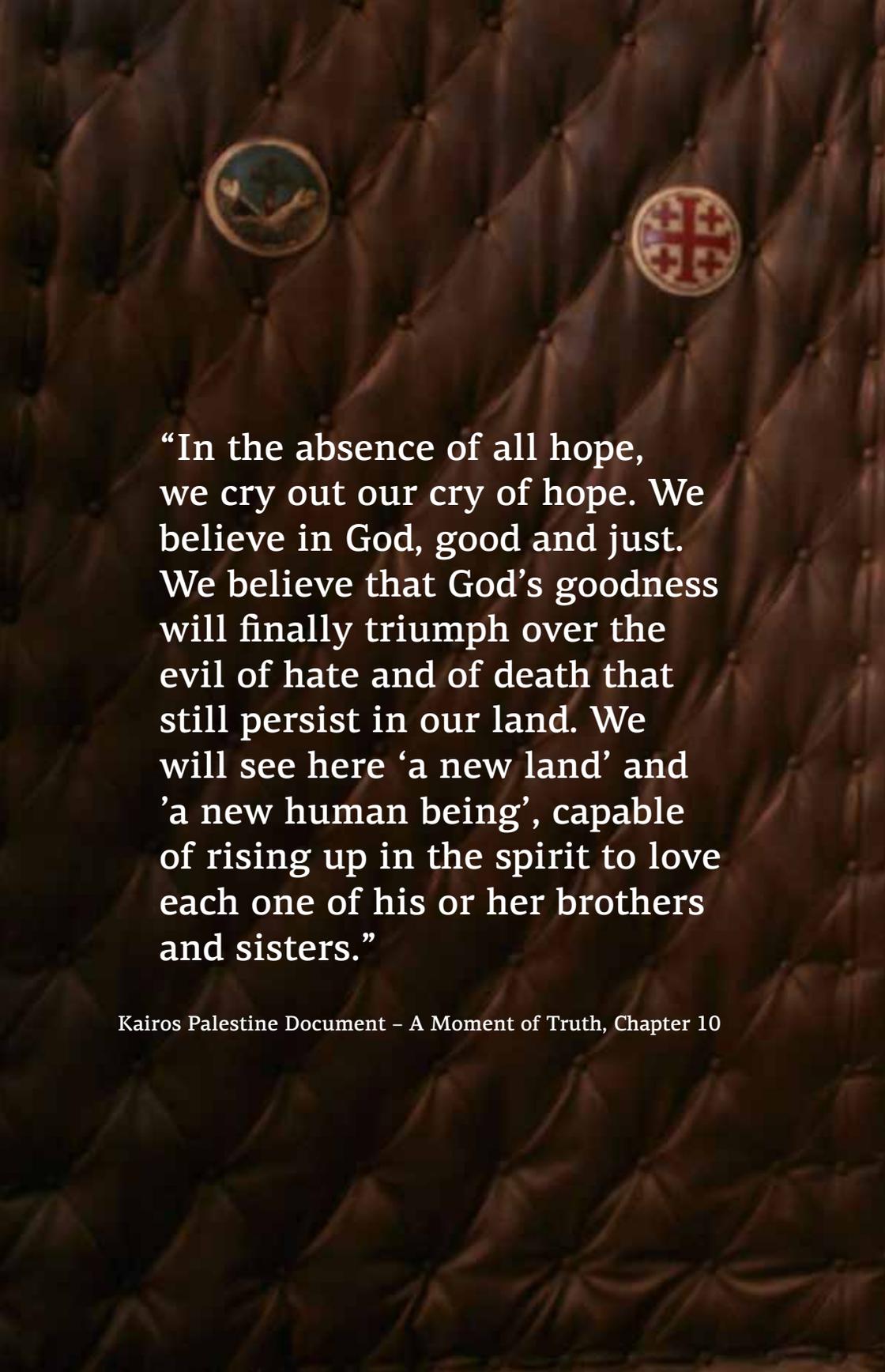
*Fr. Bashar Fawadleh is a Latin Seminar Priest in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem; he holds a bachelor degree in Theology and Philosophy. Since 2014 he has been the chaplain of Christian Youth Movement in Palestine. He is also the Chief of Christmas Fund Student in Al Quds University- Jerusalem and a member of Justice and Peace Commission in Jerusalem.*

”

**Reflect:** A Western pilgrim returning from Palestine observed, “My hopes are small, wishes really: a nice house, good friends, a promotion at work. The Palestinians taught me the difference between a wish and a hope. They truly anticipate what they can’t yet see, and dare against all odds to work to make it happen.” For what do you dare hope, the realization of which it’ll take something like a resurrection from death to experience it? Are you willing to trust and work to bring it about?

**Pray:** God of the Harvest, may the seeds of faith, hope and love planted by people of faith and good will bring a return of justice and peace throughout the world. Your kingdom come, Lord, here on earth.  
Amen.

**Act:** Read (or reread) the Kairos Palestine Document ([www.kairospalestine.ps](http://www.kairospalestine.ps)). Organize a Kairos Palestine event (education and action) in the first quarter of 2019.



“In the absence of all hope,  
we cry out our cry of hope. We  
believe in God, good and just.  
We believe that God’s goodness  
will finally triumph over the  
evil of hate and of death that  
still persist in our land. We  
will see here ‘a new land’ and  
‘a new human being’, capable  
of rising up in the spirit to love  
each one of his or her brothers  
and sisters.”

Kairos Palestine Document – A Moment of Truth, Chapter 10





Fourth Sunday  
*in Advent*

# *A Light in the darkness*

By Nora Carmi

There is no doubt that the birth of Jesus the Christ in an insignificant little town was a milestone for history, a special moment, a “Kairos” that would bring forth unimaginable changes into the world. For believers who accepted the Incarnation as the expression of God’s unlimited love for humanity, the babe born in a poor manger was to be good news of joy for all the people and to bring peace on earth among men-human beings, with an equal emphasis on Glory to God in the highest, as announced by the angels to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock (Luke 2:10, 12).

For the indigenous Palestinians in Bethlehem and Beit Sahour, where this great event took place, the Incarnation creates a real and tangible place in their hometowns. It’s the source of their roots and heritage. Yet for all believers, Bethlehem and Beit Sahour are also centers of their faith, a proof of God’s connection with humanity. For the myriads of pilgrims and tourists who flock to the area, even after thousands of years, the followers of Jesus, Christians of different denominations, may be seeking answers leading to a renewal and confirmation of their faith. For everyone though, the crucial question is, Why is there still no peace in this land from where the message of love was proclaimed to the whole world?

As the situation in the region becomes even more unjust and intolerable, Christmas is still celebrated in the little town of Bethlehem with fervor and piety. But lately, the celebration has taken the form of more flamboyant decorations: bright electric lights; huge plastic expensive trees; and tens of Santa Clauses. Yes, modern Western trends have infiltrated our modest traditions and lives where the true meaning of Christmas is still highlighted by international and local choirs, and our spiritual liturgies are held in the traditional cave on Christmas Eve. Above all exchanged gifts, the most significant and precious is the mysterious and glorious birth

of the One who would lead to liberation and salvation.

Because Jesus had experienced life under Roman Occupation, indigenous Palestinian Christians can easily relate to that Savior, especially amidst their growing despair because of the increasing inhuman measures imposed on them that, not only deprive them of their basic human, national and social rights, but trample upon their dignity and deny their humanity. Christians here and abroad try to find answers in the Holy book and are shaken that Jesus cried over Jerusalem because it did not know the things that make for peace. (Luke 19:41-44) Tribulations will happen, he said, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation. Then and now, human beings are filled with false pride that they are powerful and do not need the Creator.

Jesus is portrayed as the light (that) shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:5) He said in John 8:12, I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life. 1 John 1: 5-7 reiterates: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another. Not everyone has accepted the light and even many who say that they have, do not abide by or live according to the teachings of love, justice and mercy that are cornerstones in most religions.

For believers of all faiths, monotheistic religions have chosen to worship God, each in different ways but, and in principle, all are in accord about doing the will of God and working for God's glory which is reflected in the way we treat others, friends and foes alike. However, modern times have witnessed a distancing away from religions and spirituality leading to extremism and fanaticism, racism and materialism, void of moral values and ethics. How can there be discipline and harmony if we do not hold to any light and we plunge into deeper abysses of darkness, violence and terror? Should not secular international laws

and declarations of human rights establish distinct rules of accountability for all?

When I read the Nazareth declaration of Jesus the Christ in Luke 4:18-19 about the way of life to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free, I immediately see that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that upholds the same principles could be the mechanism to defend and safeguard all oppressed people. Another light in today's darkness!



As we get closer to Christmas, we cannot but honestly admit that our experience in Palestine/Israel has been a disappointing one. So far, no religious, political or international group has been able to ensure preserving the creation of God in the land that promised peace. Can we hope that a light will shine in the darkness when we recognize that we are all equal and have the right to resist injustice by not repaying evil with evil?

If and when individuals, communities and governments realize that we refuse to be pulled down by hatred and dehumanization of our brothers and sisters, we are insisting not to lose hope in the possibility of providing a tiny dim light in the darkness. Then the star of Bethlehem will keep shining.



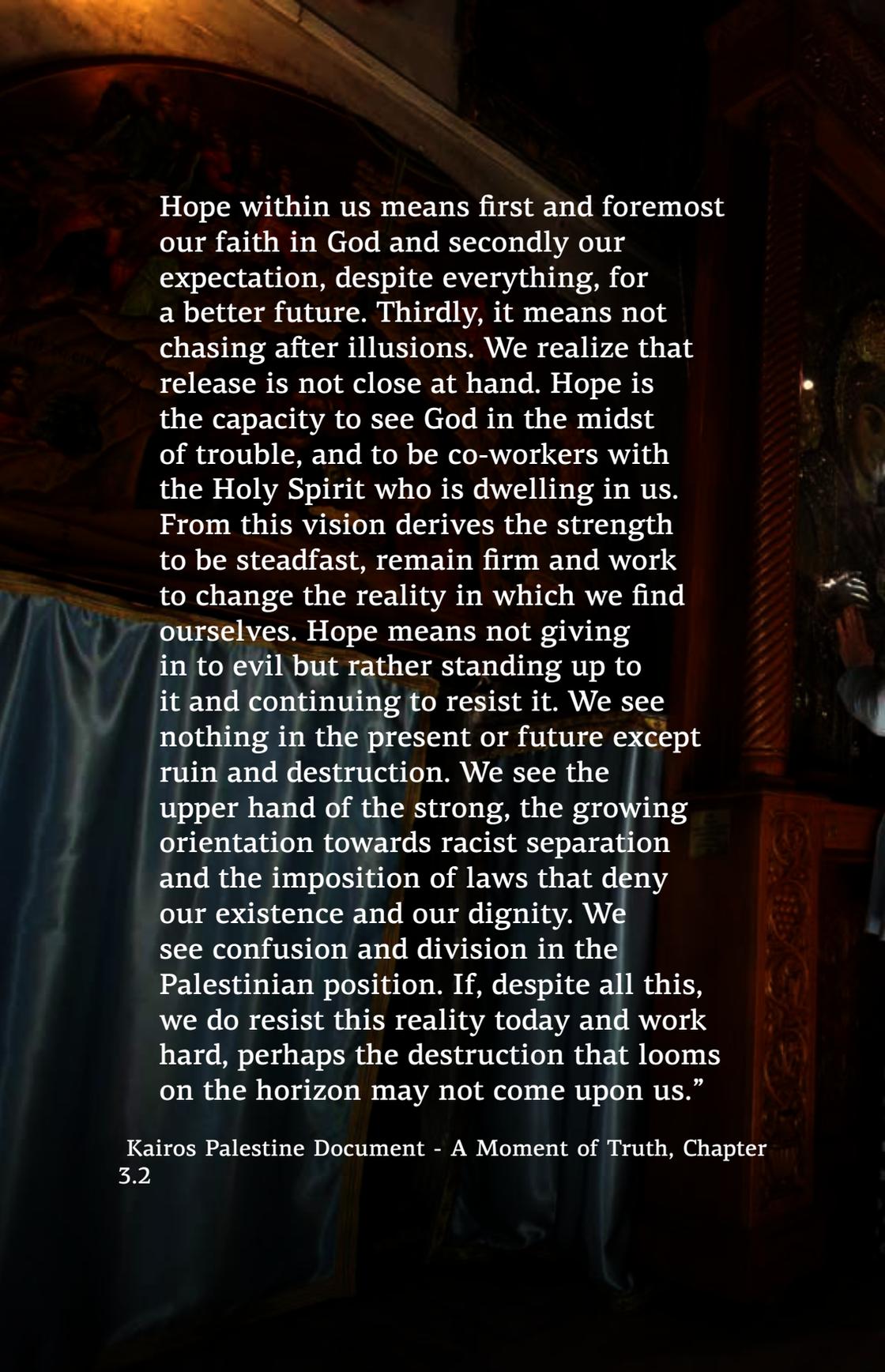
*Nora Arsenian Carmi is a Palestinian activist from Armenian descent. She has worked for many years professionally and as a volunteer in community development and empowerment through women's organizations along with theological and charitable organizations to ensure legitimate national rights that are based on values and international laws that guarantee justice and peace for all, locally and internationally. Since her retirement from Kairos Palestine, Nora continues her volunteer work in the local community. She hasn't stopped writing and she participates in international engagements to raise awareness to find practical ways to achieve a just peace. Among her many international volunteer missions, Nora represents the State of Palestine in the World Day of Prayer Movement.*



**Reflect:** What are “the things that make for peace”? In your life, in your community, in your nation, in the world?

**Pray:** God Who Hears the Cries of the Oppressed, I pray for all who suffer the ongoing, seemingly never-ending consequences of colonialization and occupation. Visit them this holy season with the light of your love. Move the faithful in churches, synagogues and mosques, along with all people of good will, to be that light in their lives in practical and transforming ways. In the name of the One who, for our sake, kept faith under occupation, amen.

**Act:** Begin planning to participate in an alternative tour to Palestine and Israel, during which you’ll visit the holy sites, experience many of the realities of occupation that Jesus suffered, and meet with Muslims, Jews and Christians who are working for a just and lasting peace.



Hope within us means first and foremost our faith in God and secondly our expectation, despite everything, for a better future. Thirdly, it means not chasing after illusions. We realize that release is not close at hand. Hope is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us. From this vision derives the strength to be steadfast, remain firm and work to change the reality in which we find ourselves. Hope means not giving in to evil but rather standing up to it and continuing to resist it. We see nothing in the present or future except ruin and destruction. We see the upper hand of the strong, the growing orientation towards racist separation and the imposition of laws that deny our existence and our dignity. We see confusion and division in the Palestinian position. If, despite all this, we do resist this reality today and work hard, perhaps the destruction that looms on the horizon may not come upon us.”

# *Christmas day message: New Hope in a New Orient*

By Fr. Jamal Khader

The birth of every baby is a new beginning, the beginning of a new life. The birth of a baby is a sign from God that he has not yet tired of us, that he still believes in us, and in the good he bestows upon us despite our sins and weaknesses. The birth of Jesus Christ is a new beginning and new hope, not just for a family or people but for all humanity. In a world dominated by oppression and violence, we urgently look forward to the light to come, the light of justice and peace. In a world dominated by the powers of darkness, unseen powers control the destiny of nations by extracting money under the guise of an open market economy. We need light to disburse the darkness and announce the coming of a new dawn. "The light shines in the darkness, and darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

The Middle East suffers with millions of refugees forced to leave their homes and towns to escape a new Herod of a different name who seeks to kill and destroy them. We pray for every refugee to return to their homes and cities, assured of the safety of their lives and those of their families. In the context of the painful reality in our world today, we understand the meaning and power of the birth of Christ as a light for nations, a new dawn without sunset, a new hope that overcomes hopelessness and surrender. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; for those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2)

Christ was born in Bethlehem, and when we celebrate Christmas in the city of Bethlehem we can say, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1: 14) In Bethlehem, light came from the heavens and the voice of angels was heard: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on

earth.” Here in Palestine we pray for Christmas to bring new hope for Palestine and peace on earth. The good tidings of the birth of Christ emanated from here to the whole world, and from here our plea is sent for peace in our country. Let us all pray: “O God, may your peace prevail in the country that you chose to be your own. You are the Lord of Peace; you are the peace we long for.”

The people of the Middle East, especially in Palestine, Syria and Iraq, live in tragic conditions. People are suffering simply for being citizens who want to live in safety and security. The wounded refugees include Christians and Moslems, with killing and destruction present in all walks



of life. Many ask if there is light at the end of the tunnel? Is there an end to the killing and destruction? Who stands behind all these wars and perpetuates them? Believers raise their eyes to the Almighty and cry “How long, LORD?” (Psalm 13:1) In the Orient we do not ask “Where is God?” but “Where are you, God?” Our cry turns into a prayer to the one who we believe does not forget us, who does not accept the suffering of humanity, and who cannot tolerate people’s misery. From where should help and salvation come?

God’s reply to the prayers of the suffering was to send his son incarnate to become human like us, to share our life, pains, and hopes for a better life in which we plant the seeds of God’s heaven in this land. The birth of Christ in Bethlehem is God’s response to humankind’s anticipation of salvation. The son of God became one of us: born poor and homeless; forced to leave his land and migrate to Egypt to return later; forced to escape the grip of King Herod who perpetrated any crime to preserve his throne and authority. Christ had to resist evil and call for repentance of the heart, and to restore dignity to every poor and suffering person so that their lost humanity is restored. Christ himself is the light that shines at the end of the tunnel. He is the one who breaks down the barriers that separate people from each other, and the one who ends enmity among them (review Ephesians 2:14).

However, God’s response does not come from heaven to solve all the problems of humanity. God wanted men and women to take part in this work, which is the building of the kingdom of God. As the Psalmist wrote: “Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.” (Psalm 85:11-13) The birth of Christ is a message addressed to us to receive he who comes as a savior to share our state and embrace his mission, a mission of mercy and righteousness, a mission of benevolence and peace. Thus, the mission of Christ becomes our mission and we join with him to provide light in this world and to build bridges. If Christ is our hope, then we also should act as a sign of hope for the suffering Orient. If Christ is our peace, then we should become tools of peace and justice among people.

We go forth with the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring love.

Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.

Where there is discord, let me bring union.

Where there is error, let me bring truth.

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.

Where there is despair, let me bring hope.

Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.

Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.



*Fr. Dr. Jamal Khader is a priest at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, ordained in 1988. After several years of pastoral experience, he continued his studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (1994-1998), where he obtained his PHD in Dogmatic Theology.*

*Fr. Khader has served as: Professor of Theology at the Latin Patriarchal Seminary (1998-2017) and at Bethlehem University (2000-2017); Chairperson of the Department of Religious Studies at Bethlehem University (2003 – 2013); Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Bethlehem University (2008-2013); Rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary (2013-2017); and Pastor of the Holy Family Church in Ramallah. He is one of the co-writers of the “Kairos Palestine document.”*



**Reflect:** In a world dominated by oppression and violence, where do you see the light of Christ? In what ways can you more fully live into Christ's charge, "You are the light of the world"?

**Pray:** O Master, let me not seek as much to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love,  
for it is in giving that I will receive,  
it is in self-forgetting that I will find,  
it is in pardoning that I am pardoned,  
it is in dying that I am raised to  
eternal life.  
Come this Holy Season, Lord Jesus.  
Amen.

**Act:** Write or email a note to your Palestinian sisters and brothers: [kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps).

# *The Way Forward*

By Rifat Kassis

Dear Sisters and Brothers,  
On behalf of all Palestinian Christians, Kairos Palestine sends you warm greetings and Christmas blessings from the birth city of Jesus Christ, Bethlehem.

Many of our Christian sisters and brothers around the world aren't aware of the existence of Palestinian Christians in this land. Many think that Palestinian Christians have been converted to Christianity due to the mission work in our land which started some decades back.

This is not true!

Palestinian Christians have been here since the beginning of Christianity when Jesus called his first disciples. Our ancestors walked with and were taught by Jesus Christ. The presence of Christians in our land has never been interrupted. Our forebears managed to survive during all dark times in the history of our area.

Today, our presence as Christian and Muslim Palestinians is threatened due to the Israeli colonization of our land.

Palestinian Christians in the West Bank are concentrated mainly in Bethlehem Governorate. They constitute a sum of 60 thousand people. The area is being referred to as the Christian triangle: Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. This area is being strangled and suffocated – in access to land, water, business, health services, education, mobility, and all related rights – by the Israeli occupation's policies of land grab, settlement construction and the Apartheid Wall illegally built on confiscated Palestinian lands. Moreover, forcible displacement and isolation has separated and split the triangle from its center, Jerusalem, a devastation to both people in Jerusalem as well as in the Bethlehem area.

Facts on the ground are bleak! Today Bethlehem is surrounded by settlements and the wall from three sides. More than 18 Jewish-only settlements surround Bethlehem with more than 100,000 Jewish settlers living in them. The Apartheid Wall extends on more than 80 km from its land and it is not yet completed. There are around 30 check points and roadblocks around Bethlehem, limiting the movement of its citizens and making their lives miserable and unbearable.



What remains available of Bethlehem to its people today – for housing, recreation, education and commerce – is less than 13% of its original land.

On June 12, 2017, the National Coalition of Christians Organizations in Palestine (NCCOP) issued together with Kairos Palestine an open letter to the ecumenical movement worldwide stating the urgency of our situation, and emphasizing that our presence as Palestinian Christians in our land is at the edge. To our great disappointment, little attention was given to this letter.

However, there is still a chance to protect the Christian presence in this land and solve this conflict peacefully if, and only if, the international community -- including the churches – courageously stands for a just peace and refuses Israeli impunity while insisting that Israel comply with international law. By pressuring Israel to stop its abuse of power and to grant the Palestinians our rights, you can make a crucial difference.

**Time is running out.**

But with your strength, solidarity, commitment, and compassion – combined with your bold, public, and united refusal to accept any outcome other than an end to oppression – together, we can turn the tide. We can finally live in peace with justice, the peace that all peoples aspire to, and the kind of peace that was announced for in Bethlehem.

Kairos Palestine urges you to, please, do the following:

- 1. Distribute and study background materials and theological reflections in your churches each Sunday of Advent to inform and educate your community about the situation of your Palestinian family living under Israeli occupation.**
- 2. Share the alert with congregations, regions, conferences, presbyteries and dioceses across your country.**
- 3. Send letters of solidarity and support for justice in Palestine/Israel to the Israeli embassies in your own country. For further information, see [www.allembassies.com/israeli\\_embassies.htm](http://www.allembassies.com/israeli_embassies.htm)**
- 4. “Come and see.” We will fulfill our role to make it known to you the truth of our reality, receiving you as pilgrims – sisters and brothers – coming to us to pray, carrying a message of peace, love and reconciliation. Thus you will know the facts and the people of this land, Palestinians and Israelis alike. (Kairos 6.2)**
- 5. Take tangible actions. Support Palestinian rights by supporting Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with International Law and UN resolutions. Support the right of corporations, states and nations to boycott Israel as an expression of the freedom of speech.**
- 6. Inform your Palestinian brothers and sisters about the ways you have been involved with the Christmas Alert by writing us at this email address: [kairos@kairospalestine.ps](mailto:kairos@kairospalestine.ps). Contact us for any other reason, too. Our strength and courage are emboldened by our contacts with you.**

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Throughout his career, *Rifat Kassis* has been advocating and actively campaigning for the effective application of international human rights and humanitarian law in Palestine, through various professional and voluntary positions. In 1988 he started working in the East Jerusalem YMCA as director for its rehabilitation programs in the West Bank. In 1995, he co-founded the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG). In 1991, he founded the first Palestinian independent Child Rights NGO, a national section of the Geneva-based global child rights movement, Defense for Children International (DCI). Rifat served as president of DCI-Palestine, and later became president of the DCI movement at the global level

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## **Kairos Palestine – A moment of truth**

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