

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Catholic Church

In the Catholic Church, disagreements are commonplace over a whole range of issues, be they political, social, economic, religious or historical, but at the end of the day these differences of opinion can be resolved through amicable discussion, prayer and a sense of fellowship and family in Christ. There is one issue, however, that divides so deeply that it has the potential to create permanent separation, and this is the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. There are ‘Catholics for Palestine’ and there are ‘Catholics for Israel’, and never the twain shall meet, for if they do, words are uttered that bring an end to further communication.

For example, in a recent conversation with another Catholic on a website discussion forum, a priest with a very senior position in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem wrote: “If you don’t recognize me as part of the Palestinian people, I don’t want you to pity my sufferings”, by which he implies that his national affiliation is more important to him than membership of the Church. Another once said “first I am a Palestinian, then I am an Arab, and then I am a priest”, before adding that personal sympathy with Israel excluded one from being a part of the “Palestinian Christian Community”. These statements from Catholic priests indicate a sense of national or ethnic belonging that supersedes Catholic fellowship. Although they might sound at home in a nationalist Church, they do not fit comfortably in the Church of the Roman Catholics. In fact, they betray a somewhat uncatholic spirit. One might indeed be tempted to wonder whether this spirit could one day inspire schism in the form of a breakaway Palestinian National Church.

Whether or not this is an over-dramatization of the division within the Catholic Church, there is nevertheless an urgent need to resolve it, since it is creating serious tensions in areas where Israeli and Palestinian Catholics are living in close contact, as for example in Jerusalem. We can be fairly sure that the Person who prayed “that they may all be one” (Jn 17,21) would not be pleased with this division in his Church, where there should be “neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3,28), or, by analogy, ‘neither Jew nor Palestinian’.

Needless to say, both sides invoke Scripture to justify their positions: often in a spirit of animosity towards Israel, the ‘Catholics for Palestine’ quote those scriptural passages that speak about God’s love of justice and interpret the realization of divine justice in political terms, as the establishment of independent Palestinian State on lands currently held under Israeli sovereignty. ‘Catholics for Israel’, on the other hand, without negating the importance of the justice and dignity that is due to the Palestinians, cite those passages that support the return of the Jewish people to the land of their forefathers, and interpret this as the unfolding of God’s justice for them, in a way that believing Christians should accept and respect. Expressed like this, a fundamental difference can be discerned: both sides see the issue in terms of divine justice, with ‘Catholics for Palestine’ interpreting this politically for themselves, and ‘Catholics for Israel’ interpreting it prophetically with especial reference to the Jews.

In brief, ‘Catholics for Palestine’ want justice for themselves and their people in the form of independent political sovereignty (a kingdom of this world), and care not for the Jews, while ‘Catholics for Israel’ want the fulfillment of God’s will and divine justice for the Jews, and care not for themselves. The argument of the first group hangs on their conviction that God establishes his justice by granting political sovereignty, and the argument of the second group hangs on the conviction that the return of the Jews to their homeland and the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty represent God’s will and are therefore an authentic expression of God’s justice. Restating the issues in this way, we can perhaps move forward a step or two, by discussing the merits, or demerits, of each side.

In several ways, and at different times, Christ made it clear that 'his kingdom is not of this world' (Jn 18,36). His purpose was not to fight against the rule of the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom for the Jews. If he had done this successfully, he might then have been accepted by his fellow Jews, as their Messiah. As it was he was rejected, because far from inciting, or in any way supporting, the nationalist rebellion of his countrymen against the Roman occupiers, Jesus focussed on bringing his heavenly Kingdom to them. The degree to which Jesus set himself apart from the nationalist aspirations of his contemporaries is revealed by his uncommonly sympathetic attitude to the Roman occupiers: for example, he admired the Roman centurion's faith and was pleased to heal his child or servant (Mt 8,5-13 et par), he counselled his people to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, foremost among whom were the Romans (Mt 5,43-48 et par), he advised them to go two miles with the soldier who forced them to go only one mile (Mt 5,41), he recommended paying taxes to Caesar (Mt 22,15-22), he recognized that Pilate's authority came from God (Jn 19,11) and he begged the Father to forgive the Roman soldiers who crucified him (Lk 23,34). From these Gospel passages, it is evident that Jesus' attitude towards the Roman occupiers was extremely conciliatory. As the Israelis today stand in a similar position to the Romans in those days, it is reasonable to conclude that Christ's attitude to them would be much the same.

If we take the example of Jesus as the clearest expression of God's will, it would be erroneous to assume that God's justice, as shown to us in Christ, may inevitably find expression in the granting of political sovereignty. If God, working through Jesus, did not do this for his own people, when they were crying out for sovereign independence in the first century AD, then surely we should not assume or expect that God's justice will be established in this way in 21st century Palestine. We should be further discouraged from thinking this way by the fact that the Jews' insistence on political independence and sovereignty, which they saw as a prerequisite for God's justice and redemption, led to such catastrophic loss following their two major rebellions against Roman rule in 70 AD and again in 135 AD. Taking this lesson from Jewish history 2000 years ago, it would be presumptuous to equate Palestinian statehood with the establishment of divine justice. There is no divine guarantee that the citizens of a future Palestinian State would end up with more justice and human rights than they have in their present condition. In fact, history tells us they might end up with much less.

In summary, we should not expect Jesus Christ to endorse our desire for divine justice through Palestinian sovereignty, because that is simply not the way he works. Political activism is one thing, God's justice through Christ is another, and they should not be confused. Quoting biblical texts in favour of this approach is quite clearly an example of the political manipulation of religious texts.

Passing to the other side, we must ask how 'Catholics for Israel' can be so sure that the return of the Jews to their homeland and the establishment of their State are in accordance with God's will, and therefore represent an expression of divine justice and salvation? Is this just another ill-conceived attempt to see divine justice in political terms, to the advantage of Israeli political sovereignty this time, rather than that of the Palestinians. For if this were the case, the above arguments, based on the example of Jesus, would apply with the same force as they did before. But here the issue is different: it focuses primarily on the return of the Jews from exile, and only secondarily on their attainment of political sovereignty, which they deem necessary for their self-preservation.

So to repeat, how can 'Catholics for Israel' be so sure that the ingathering of the Jews in the land of their forefathers, after 2000 years of life without a land of their own, is actually an expression of God's will and a manifestation of his justice? In contrast with the former view, with its political understanding of divine justice, this view is based on a

biblical and prophetic understanding of the establishment of God's justice among men, i.e., it is based upon an understanding of God's plan of salvation for mankind. Simply stated, this view sees the return of the Jews to this Land as the fulfilment of prophecy for the end of history. As it is God who inspired the prophecy of these things, then it is indeed God who is behind their realization. The return of the Jews to the Holy Land should therefore be accepted not only as divinely sanctioned and inevitable, but also as a clear sign of the approaching Eschaton, the end of history, which is to say the final stage of the working out of God's divine plan. Resist it as you may, but do so with the awareness that you are opposing the divine will.

"What are these biblical sources?" one may ask. There is no need to repeat all those passages in which we are told of the giving of this Land in a Covenant to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Gen 12,7; 15,7-21; Ex 32,13; Ps 105,9; Sir 44,22), whose remnant nowadays call themselves Jews. It would be a mistake to think that this gift has been cancelled or abrogated in any way by the New Covenant, because we know from St. Paul that the gifts and the call that God bestowed upon the Jews are irrevocable (Rom 11,29). Although exile was imposed upon the Jews in the first century as a penalty for their political misunderstanding of God's plan of redemption, it was inevitable, from both the Jewish and the Christian reading of Scripture, that if they survived their exile, they would one day return to their Land. God has never rescinded his gifts, of which the gift of the Land is among the most prominent.

The return of the Jews to the Holy Land started in the late 19th century and has little to do with the Holocaust, as some assert, since it started decades before that tragedy. In fact, their return was not entirely a return, because Jews have lived in this Land as a minority throughout the centuries. The immense loss of Jewish life in the Holocaust, and the British administration's policy of restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine in those years, actually represented a significant set-back for Jewish ingathering and restoration in the Holy Land.

When we come to biblical prophecy, however, we find that all the Old Testament prophecies of the return of the Jews refer to their return from Babylonian exile in the 5th century BC and do not appear to apply to their return from a second exile, 2,500 years later. But a close look at these prophecies reveals that they were never fully realized in the centuries following the return from Babylon, and are therefore still valid in a certain way. One could argue that they were never fully realized principally because the Jews rejected their Messiah, whose task it was to bring them to complete fulfilment. By rejecting their Messiah, they temporarily frustrated the will of God for them (Lk 7,30) and, as we saw above, this ultimately led them into exile for 2000 years, during which time the Gospel of God's salvation went out into all the world. In a very real way, then, the Jews' rejection of their Messiah, and their subsequent exile, have allowed for the evangelization of all peoples, in a way that St. Paul captures when he writes: "But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (Rom 11,11-12).

But the evangelization of the world was never presented as an end in itself, to go on and on forever. The Gospel makes it clear that after Christ's offer of salvation has been preached in all the world, the time will be ripe for the perfect fulfilment of God's plan (Mt 24,14; Mk 13,10). It is this final episode in the history of salvation that takes us back to the unfulfilled parts of the ancient prophecies of return and restoration. The problem here, though, is that there are so many prophecies saying so many things in different contexts about events which may or may not be related to each other, that it is beyond human understanding to know exactly how they will all be fulfilled. The Jews have dealt with this

problem by leaving these prophecies for their Messiah to interpret, whenever he comes. In this respect, Christians have a distinct advantage, for the Messiah Jesus has indeed provided them with his unique revelation of the way God's plan of salvation is going to be completely fulfilled. And this revelation of Jesus Christ is recorded in the Book of Revelation (cf. Rev 1,1-2).

Without going into the details of the interpretation of this unique and precious document, it is enough to say that the central part of the prophecy describes the mission of two prophets, or witnesses, of Christ (Rev 11,3-13), which is followed immediately by the brief reign of the Antichrist (Rev 13) and then by Second Coming of Christ (Rev 19, cf. 2Thess 2,1-12). The eschatological mission of these two witnesses is directed specifically to the Jews and is centred on Jerusalem, such that their death and resurrection in that city (11,7-8) result in the conversion of many (11,11-13). This witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ is described in terms that recall the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision of Israel's restoration (Ezek 37, 1-14), thus linking faith in Christ's resurrection to the final restoration of all Israel. It is impossible to conceive of this eschatological event without the ingathering of the Jews to Jerusalem and its environs. With good reason, one could say that this New Testament prophecy, written soon after the destruction of the temple and the exile of the Jewish inhabitants in 70 AD, did indeed foresee the return of the Jews to Jerusalem as a necessary precursor to the events it describes. The whole scene harmonizes with St. Paul's prediction of the conversion of the Jews at the end of history: "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon a part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved..." (Rom 11,25-26). With these end-time events depending on the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, is it really appropriate to demonize those who live in the areas that the Palestinians claim for themselves, accusing them of sins against humanity and against God? Is Palestinian sovereignty under Islam really more important than the happening of events leading up to the consummation of God's plan of salvation?

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the Papal Preacher, eloquently summarizes the long-awaited fulfillment of these prophecies in the following way: "We know that God gave Israel the land but there is no mention of his taking it back again forever. Can we Christians exclude that what is happening in our day, that is, the return of Israel to the land of its fathers, is not connected in some way, still a mystery to us, to this providential order which concerns the chosen people and which is carried out even through human error and excess as happens in the Church itself? If Israel is to enter the New Covenant one day, St. Paul tells us that they will not do so a few at a time but as an entire nation, as ever-living 'roots'. But if Israel is to enter as a nation, it must be a nation; it must have a land of its own, an organization and a voice in the midst of other nations of the earth. The fact that Israel has remained an ethnic unity throughout the centuries and throughout many historical upheavals is, in itself, a sign of a destiny that has not been interrupted but is waiting to be fulfilled" (from *Christ, the Glory of Israel*).

Before concluding, let us now try to summarize the issues that divide 'Catholics for Palestine' and 'Catholics for Israel'. 'Catholics for Palestine' are crying out for God's justice in the form of an independent Palestinian State that will, in many ways, hamper and restrict the return of the Jews to the land of their forefathers, especially in the areas around Jerusalem, which they call Judaea and Samaria. 'Catholics for Israel', on the other hand, sense the eschatological significance of the Jewish return and resist any attempt to obstruct or impede it, for they recognize this as a key stage in the history of divine salvation, and therefore of the ultimate establishment of divine justice among mankind. (It goes without saying that this support for the ingathering of the Jews is not to be equated with the condoning of any unlawful acts of expropriation, violence, injustice, or hatred against

Palestinians. If and whenever such acts have *truly* been committed, ‘Catholics for Israel’ condemn them together with our Palestinian Christian brothers).

The ‘Catholics for Palestine’ want justice for themselves and their people and interpret this in purely political terms, regardless of how it impacts on the divine plan for the Jews. We have argued that their demand is not consistent with the way Christ works. ‘Catholics for Israel’ see the return of the Jews as part of the God’s plan for them, leading to events that will help them, in large numbers, to see Jesus as their Messiah. Recognizing this, ‘Catholics for Israel’ welcome and encourage the ingathering of the Jews, and will do anything do remove obstacles and impediments from its path. In this spirit, and for these reasons, ‘Catholics for Israel’ call on ‘Catholics for Palestine’ to renounce their opposition to Jewish settlement in Judaea and Samaria, or anywhere else in this Land, and to be prepared to work and pray earnestly for their salvation in Christ Jesus. This is the only way forward for believers in Christ. Opposition there will certainly be, especially from those who do not understand the justice and will of God, and have no knowledge of his plan of salvation. But for all Christians, and especially those in the Catholic household, the working out of God’s plan of salvation should be accepted and respected, so much so that it may become for them a source of faith, hope and unity in Christ.

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