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QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE OCCUPIED
ARAB TERRITORIES, INCLUDING PALESTINE

Letter dated 16 February 1979 from the Permanent Representative
of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations Office at
Geneva addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to request you to circulate the attached article, which appeared in the 9 January 1979 issue of Osservatore Romano, as a document of the Commission on Human Rights.

(Signed): Dia-Allah EL-FATTAL

Ambassador
Permanent Representative

CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLY LAND

The figures disclosed by His Beatitude Gilcorno Baltuzzi, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, in a speech delivered at St. Paul, in the United States, on the subject of the Christians of the Holy Land, cannot leave indifferent those who believe in Christ, Son of God, Redeemer of Mankind, and who accept the principles of civil co-existence associated with respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

In the past 30 years, as many as 100,000 Christians have left the Land of Jesus. For countries used to emigration, this is a "normal" quota; but for the Holy Land, it represents the limit beyond which there is only desert. For the Patriarch Baltuzzi stated that the Christian population of the Holy Land now numbers 94,742 Catholics, 50,233 Orthodox and 7,200 Protestants. Thus, compared with the total Christian population, the exodus has been on a massive scale. This situation cannot fail to alarm us.

The reasons which have led more than one-third of the Christians to leave their country and hence their particular Church are undoubtedly manifold. But, as no one can be unaware, the most cogent are political. This region has been the scene of wars which have had political, economic and cultural consequences; of which the Christian community has been the unwilling victim.

The situation of "non-war" and "non-peace", which is nevertheless marked by a policy aimed at keeping what has been occupied by force, continues to breed instability and insecurity. This situation has been worsened by the difficulties experienced by Christians in asserting their rights - and not only their strictly religious rights. Exile then becomes for many - too many - the only means of escape from the grip of violence. To remain in their country, in their Church, is a sacrifice which not all can bear.

In recent years, there has been no lack of initiatives on the part of the world Christian community to help its brethren. Pope Paul VI provided more than eloquent testimony of this both by his pilgrimage, and by his exhortation De auctis Ecclesiae of 25 March 1974. The positive results are appreciable, as the Patriarch himself recognizes. But are they enough? If the exodus should continue, if the Christian community in the Holy Land were to be unable to develop in an atmosphere of freedom, justice and peace, there would be reason to fear for its future. Pope Paul himself alluded to this fear in his apostolic exhortation: "If their numbers should continue to decline, the flame of living witness at the shrines would be extinguished, and the Christian Holy Places of Jerusalem and the Holy Land would come to resemble museums".

If, on the contrary, the Christian community is to be able to remain and develop, the causes which oppress and impoverish it must be eliminated. It is not a matter of prestige but, first and foremost, one of justice. Peoples today are keenly alive to respect for and the promotion of justice. But justice is meaningless unless it includes respect for and the promotion of the fundamental rights and freedoms which those same peoples have subscribed to in solemn documents.

Christians the world over are more than ever committed to solidarity with their brethren in the Faith living in the Holy Land. Solidarity is expressed in concrete acts, in acts of assistance, calculated not only to alleviate suffering and privation but also to strengthen trust and hope in Christ and in His Church, which, though exposed to vexation and to stress, have always managed to survive, to spread and to proclaim the truth.

The Franciscans, the guardians of the shrines for more than seven centuries, have built up a large network of social, cultural and welfare agencies for the Christians living there, which benefit non-Christians as well. Other male and female religious institutions have joined them. It is one of the many ways of attesting to the presence of the universal Church in the Land of Jesus. The local clergy are also deeply involved in spreading the gospel and in pastoral activities. The patriarchate is the focal point and driving force for a vast and far-reaching programme that requires the co-operation of all religious forces for its implementation.

Favourable conditions must be created for the Christians in the Holy Land to enable them to survive in the country, for it is their country and their homeland. They do not ask for privileges, but only for the protection of their rights. It is especially the families who ask this so that the new generations may not feel themselves to be "strangers" in the land of their birth. The profession of faith cannot be reduced to a simple private phenomenon; it needs room to express itself in communion and by way of institutions. The shrines must be dynamic centres of evangelical witness and of a fervent presence of the Church.

Gino CONCETTI