



The Holy See

JUBILEE PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE HOLY LAND (MARCH 20-26, 2000)

SPEECH OF JOHN PAUL II

WELCOME CEREMONY IN THE PALESTINIAN AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIES

*Palestinian Territories – Bethlehem Heliport
Wednesday, 22 March 2000*

*Dear Chairman Arafat,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Palestinian Friends,*

1. “Here Christ was born of the Virgin Mary”: these words, inscribed over the place where, according to tradition, Jesus was born, are the reason for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. They are the reason for my coming to Bethlehem today. They are the source of the joy, the hope, the goodwill, which, for two millennia, have filled countless human hearts at the very sound of the name “Bethlehem”.

People everywhere turn to this unique corner of the earth with a hope that transcends all conflicts and difficulties. Bethlehem – where the choir of Angels sang: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men*” (Lk 2:14) – stands out, in every place and in every age, as the promise of God’s gift of peace. The message of Bethlehem is the Good News of reconciliation among men, of peace at every level of relations between individuals and nations. Bethlehem is a universal crossroads where all peoples can meet to build together a world worthy of our human dignity and destiny. The recently inaugurated Museum of the Nativity shows how the celebration of Christ’s Birth has become a part of the culture and art of peoples in all parts of the world.

2. Mr Arafat, as I thank you for the warm welcome you have given me in the name of the Palestinian Authority and People, I express all my happiness at being here today. How can I fail to pray that the divine gift of peace will become more and more a reality for all who live in this land, uniquely marked by God's interventions? Peace for the Palestinian people! Peace for all the peoples of the region! No one can ignore how much the Palestinian people have had to suffer in recent decades. Your torment is before the eyes of the world. And it has gone on too long.

The Holy See has always recognized that the Palestinian people have the natural right to a homeland, and the right to be able to live in peace and tranquillity with the other peoples of this area (cf. Apostolic Letter *Redemptionis Anno*, 20 April 1984). In the international forum, my predecessors and I have repeatedly proclaimed that there would be no end to the sad conflict in the Holy Land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declarations.

We must all continue to work and pray for the success of every genuine effort to bring peace to this Land. Only with a just and lasting peace – not imposed but secured through negotiation – will legitimate Palestinian aspirations be fulfilled. Only then will the Holy Land see the possibility of a bright new future, no longer dissipated by rivalry and conflict, but firmly based on understanding and cooperation for the good of all. The outcome depends greatly on the courageous readiness of those responsible for the destiny of this part of the world to move to new attitudes of compromise and compliance with the demands of justice.

3. Dear Friends, I am fully aware of the great challenges facing the Palestinian Authority and People in every field of economic and cultural development. In a particular way my prayers are with those Palestinians - Muslim and Christian - who are still without a home of their own, their proper place in society and the possibility of a normal working life. My hope is that my visit today to the Dheisheh Refugee Camp will serve to remind the international community that decisive action is needed to improve the situation of the Palestinian people. I was particularly pleased at the unanimous acceptance by the United Nations of the Resolution on Bethlehem 2000, which commits the international community to help in developing this area and in improving conditions of peace and reconciliation in one of the most cherished and significant places on earth.

The promise of peace made at Bethlehem will become a reality for the world only when the dignity and rights of all human beings made in the image of God (cf. *Gen 1:26*) are acknowledged and respected.

Today and always the Palestinian people are in my prayers to the One who holds the destiny of the world in his hands. May the Most High God enlighten, sustain and guide in the path of peace the whole Palestinian people!

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