



The Holy See

PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE HOLY LAND
(8-15 MAY 2009)

WELCOMING CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

Square in front of the presidential palace - Bethlehem
Wednesday, 13 May 2009

Mr President,
Dear Friends,

I greet all of you from my heart, and I warmly thank the President, Mr Mahmoud Abbas, for his words of welcome. My pilgrimage to the lands of the Bible would not be complete without a visit to Bethlehem, the City of David and the birthplace of Jesus Christ. Nor could I come to the Holy Land without accepting the kind invitation of President Abbas to visit these Territories and to greet the Palestinian people. I know how much you have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the turmoil that has afflicted this land for decades. My heart goes out to all the families who have been left homeless. This afternoon I will pay a visit to the Aida Refugee Camp, in order to express my solidarity with the people who have lost so much. To those among you who mourn the loss of family members and loved ones in the hostilities, particularly the recent conflict in Gaza, I offer an assurance of deep compassion and frequent remembrance in prayer. Indeed, I keep all of you in my daily prayers, and I earnestly beg the Almighty for peace, a just and lasting peace, in the Palestinian Territories and throughout the region.

Mr President, the Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally

recognized borders. Even if at present that goal seems far from being realized, I urge you and all your people to keep alive the flame of hope, hope that a way can be found of meeting the legitimate aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians for peace and stability. In the words of the late [Pope John Paul II](#), there can be “no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness” ([Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace](#)). I plead with all the parties to this long-standing conflict to put aside whatever grievances and divisions still stand in the way of reconciliation, and to reach out with generosity and compassion to all alike, without discrimination. Just and peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the Middle East can only be achieved through a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, in which the rights and dignity of all are acknowledged and upheld. I ask all of you, I ask your leaders, to make a renewed commitment to work towards these goals. In particular I call on the international community to bring its influence to bear in favor of a solution. Believe and trust that through honest and persevering dialogue, with full respect for the demands of justice, lasting peace really can be attained in these lands.

It is my earnest hope that the serious concerns involving security in Israel and the Palestinian Territories will soon be allayed sufficiently to allow greater freedom of movement, especially with regard to contact between family members and access to the holy places. Palestinians, like any other people, have a natural right to marry, to raise families, and to have access to work, education and health care. I pray too that, with the assistance of the international community, reconstruction work can proceed swiftly wherever homes, schools or hospitals have been damaged or destroyed, especially during the recent fighting in Gaza. This is essential if the people of this land are to live in conditions conducive to lasting peace and prosperity. A stable infrastructure will provide your young people with better opportunities to acquire valuable skills and to seek gainful employment, enabling them to play their part in building up the life of your communities. I make this appeal to the many young people throughout the Palestinian Territories today: do not allow the loss of life and the destruction that you have witnessed to arouse bitterness or resentment in your hearts. Have the courage to resist any temptation you may feel to resort to acts of violence or terrorism. Instead, let what you have experienced renew your determination to build peace. Let it fill you with a deep desire to make a lasting contribution to the future of Palestine, so that it can take its rightful place on the world stage. Let it inspire in you sentiments of compassion for all who suffer, zeal for reconciliation, and a firm belief in the possibility of a brighter future.

Mr President, dear friends gathered here in Bethlehem, I invoke upon all the Palestinian people the blessings and the protection of our heavenly Father, and I pray fervently that the song which the angels sang here in this place will be fulfilled: peace on earth, good will among men. Thank you. And may God be with you.

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