



The Holy See

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

SPEECH OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

VISIT TO THE REFUGEE CAMP OF DHEISHEH

Palestinian Territories – Dheisheh Refugee Camp
Wednesday, 22 March 2000

Mr President,

Dear Palestinian people,

1. It is important to me that my pilgrimage to the birthplace of Jesus Christ, on this the two thousandth anniversary of that extraordinary event, includes this visit to Dheisheh. It is deeply significant that here, close to Bethlehem, I am meeting you, refugees and displaced persons, and representatives of the organizations and agencies involved in a true mission of mercy. Throughout my pontificate I have felt close to the Palestinian people in their sufferings.

I greet each one of you, and I hope and pray that my visit will bring some comfort in your difficult situation. Please God it will help to draw attention to your continuing plight. You have been deprived of many things which represent basic needs of the human person: proper housing, health care, education and work. Above all you bear the sad memory of what you were forced to leave behind, not just material possessions, but your freedom, the closeness of relatives, and the familiar surroundings and cultural traditions which nourished your personal and family life. It is true that much is being done here in Dheisheh and in other camps to respond to your needs, especially through the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency*. I am particularly pleased at the effectiveness of the presence of the *Pontifical Mission for Palestine* and many other Catholic organizations. But there is still much to be done.

2. The degrading conditions in which refugees often have to live; the continuation over long periods of situations that are barely tolerable in emergencies or for a brief time of transit; the fact that displaced persons are obliged to remain for years in settlement camps: these are the measure of the urgent need for a just solution to the underlying causes of the problem. Only a resolute effort on the part of leaders in the Middle East and in the international community as a whole – inspired by a higher vision of politics as service of the common good – can remove the causes of your present situation. My appeal is for greater international solidarity and the political will to meet this challenge. I plead with all who are sincerely working for justice and peace not to lose heart. I appeal to political leaders to implement agreements already arrived at, and to go forward towards the peace for which all reasonable men and women yearn, to the justice to which they have an inalienable right.

3. Dear young people, continue to strive through education to take your rightful place in society, despite the difficulties and handicaps that you have to face because of your refugee status. The Catholic Church is particularly happy to serve the noble cause of education through the extremely valuable work of Bethlehem University, founded as a sequel to the visit of my predecessor Pope Paul VI in 1964.

Dear brothers and sisters, dear refugees, do not think that your present condition makes you any less important in God's eyes! Never forget your dignity as his children! Here at Bethlehem the Divine Child was laid in a manger in a stable; shepherds from the nearby fields were the first to receive the heavenly message of peace and hope for the world. God's design was fulfilled in the midst of humility and poverty. Probably the pastors and shepherds of Bethlehem were your predecessors, your ancestors

Dear aid workers and volunteers, believe in the task that you are fulfilling! Genuine and practical solidarity with those in need is not a favour conceded, it is a demand of our shared humanity and a recognition of the dignity of every human being.

Let us all turn with confidence to the Lord, asking him to inspire those in a position of responsibility to promote justice, security and peace, without delay and in an eminently practical way.

The Church, through her social and charitable organizations, will continue to be at your side and will continue to plead your cause before the world.

God bless you all!

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