



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE LATIN-RITE DIOCESE OF JERUSALEM**

*To the Patriarch, the Auxiliary Bishops,
the priests and deacons,
the men and women religious,
and the faithful of the Patriarchal Diocese
of Jerusalem for Latins*

1. As the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 approaches, my thoughts turn again to the Holy Land and to Jerusalem, "Mother of all the Churches". It was in this region, where Christ's words resounded and the great events of the Redemption occurred, that the first Christian community came into being and has continued to live down the centuries without interruption.

The multifaceted presence of Catholic communities with varied traditions and of other Churches which are not in full communion with the Catholic Church makes us understand the importance of Jerusalem to all Christians and their love in turning to her.

2. Catholics there are like a small flock, but they are no less active in their witness to the Good News. Strengthened by the love of Christ and the solidarity of the universal Church, they form a community both one and many. Historical events brought trials which only the faith of many of Christ's disciples could overcome; at the same time, they have permitted the formation of a crossroads of cultures and a diversification of rites which are proving a treasure and an inspiration.

3. Today I am particularly addressing the Latin community in the Holy Land. It is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its reorganization by Pope Pius IX, who at the time appointed a residential Bishop, Giuseppe Valerga, as Patriarch of Jerusalem for Latins. He arrived in Jerusalem on 17 January 1848 and immediately began his ministry with praiseworthy zeal. It was he who was responsible for opening the first patriarchal seminary, which has formed many priests, Bishops

and Patriarchs, and even today is the heart of the Diocese.

This decision, dictated by the Successor of Peter's special pastoral attention, ensured the stability of the ministry which until then had been carried out by the Latin-rite religious working in the region. The latter, by their sacrifices, devotion and prayer, laid the solid foundation of the many parish activities which currently take place in the Patriarchal Diocese.

Through its distinguished Pastors and institutions, your Diocese has always sought to be faithful to its vocation, even in a context which throughout its 150-year history has experienced profound social, political and religious change. Today the Latin Catholic faithful who now live not only in Jerusalem but also in the Palestinian Territories, the State of Israel, the Kingdom of Jordan and Cyprus belong to this Diocese, which extended over the region then called Palestine (cf. Apostolic Letter *Nulla celebrior*, n. 3). In the Holy Land, in addition to the faithful who are predominantly Arabic-speaking, the Diocese also has a small but important Hebrew-speaking community.

With strength and courage your Diocese has shown itself worthy of the special privilege of helping to preserve and protect the Holy Places of the Redemption. Indeed, it has worked with the Franciscan Fathers' Custody of the Holy Land in fulfilling the special mandate officially entrusted to it since the 14th century by Pope Clement VI: to care for the Christian shrines and offer assistance to pilgrims there.

4. Jerusalem, crossroads of peace: this is the mysterious vocation of the Holy City in the history and geography of salvation; this vocation is becoming that of the whole region and involves all believers, Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The fact that Latin Catholics and those of the Eastern Churches live together in the same territory in different ways is particularly indicative of the Church's catholicity. This makes it possible fully to appreciate the divinely revealed heritage of the universal Church (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 1), which has been preserved and grows in the life of the Catholic Churches of the East and West. Their diversity does not harm her unity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 2), but indeed constitutes a treasure for the whole Church. Indeed, fidelity to their own traditions permits a sincere return to the sources through which the Holy Spirit renews each particular Church and works for a profound communion with all the Churches.

5. Contact with Christians who are not in full communion with the Apostolic See makes possible a sincere and real mutual exchange of joint acts of charity, which are an eloquent testimony of their reaching out to one another. It is indeed true that, in the land where the Lord suffered and rose again to gather the dispersed children of God, the duty to pray and to work for unity is more pressing, if the fullness of the Gospel message of salvation is to shine radiantly in the eyes of those who do not share our faith in Christ, the Messiah and Son of God. This witness leads one to think that any commitment to *rapprochement* between the Churches in charity is the realization of

a concrete project of mutual goodwill and represents a significant response to the interior movement of Christ's Spirit. The Lord invites all believers to bear common witness to their faith, especially in these lands where harmony among children belonging to different Christian communities can be seen.

Evidence of this co-operative effort, harmony and dialogue, which extends far beyond the Latin Patriarchal Diocese, also comes to us from the ties that the latter maintains with the region's ecclesial bodies: the *Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land*, the *Conference of Latin Bishops of the Arab Regions*, the *Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East*, the *Council of Churches of the Middle East*. Your Diocese makes a special contribution to them and receives fraternal support, by sharing its concerns and problems, which are often common or similar.

This commitment made in Christ's name can only encourage at all levels, always and everywhere, relations of mutual esteem, understanding and co-operation with our brothers and sisters who belong to other Christian Churches. In the Encyclical *Ut unum sint* on the ecumenical commitment, I had occasion to draw attention to the demands of cooperation and shared witness: "Relations between Christians are not aimed merely at mutual knowledge, common prayer and dialogue. They presuppose and from now on call for every possible form of practical co-operation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message" (n. 40; cf. Apostolic Letter *Orientalis lumen*, n. 23). 6. By its presence in the same territory as the Islamic and Jewish communities and through the exchanges it has with them, the Latin community has been prepared over time to understand the importance of interreligious dialogue in the spirit desired and recommended by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Daily life presupposes continuous contact with believers of other religious traditions, for the human, spiritual and moral development of peoples. It is obvious that respectful dialogue and joint, fraternal collaboration among all society's members can be a vigorous appeal for this same understanding to be achieved in other countries.

Regarding the ties with those who belong to the Jewish religion, it should be recalled that Jews and Christians have a common heritage which links them spiritually (cf. *Nostra aetate*, n. 4). Both are a blessing for the world (cf. Gn 12:2-3), to the extent that they work together so that peace and justice prevail among all people and all individuals and do so in fullness and in depth, according to the divine plan and in the spirit of sacrifice which this noble project can demand. They are all called to be conscious of this sacred duty and to fulfil it, through honest and friendly dialogue and by collaboration for the benefit of man and society; I am certain that this readiness to do God's will for the world will also be a blessing for our different communities and enable us to cry out with the psalmist: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky" (Ps 85 [84]:10-11).

7. In the dialogue of life and joint work with the followers of Islam, an enrichment and mutual

knowledge are acquired which are necessary for human solidarity, for fraternal understanding, for everyday peace and for the vitality of the society which all are called to build together. The attitude of Christians is not the result of a particular interest or strategy. It logically flows from the Gospel message in which Christ invites us to regard every man as a brother. I have already stressed how important it is for us all to be convinced that "each person is unique in God's eyes. Each one ought to be appreciated for who he is, and, consequently, respected as such. No one should use his fellow man; no one should exploit his equal; no one should condemn his brother. It is in these conditions that a more human, more just and more fraternal world will be able to be born, a world where each one can find his place in dignity and freedom" (*Address to Young Muslims*, Casablanca, 19 August 1985, n. 6; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 16 September 1985, p. 7).

8. Led by the Spirit and faithful to human values, rich in the exchange of gifts with the Eastern Catholic communities, with the other Christian brethren and with all your fellow citizens of other religious traditions, you Latin Catholics will be able, with your pastors' help, to face the serious trials still imposed on you each day by the political and social situation. Actually, the majority of the Holy Land's inhabitants are thirsting for justice and peace and, until this thirst is quenched, they are in danger of feeling deep frustration and helplessness. In addressing you, Pastors and faithful, I am also turning to all people of goodwill who live in Jerusalem and throughout the Middle East region: hope must never be lacking, nor the courage to seek for peaceful coexistence in justice and security. "It is God himself who asks every individual to have the courage of brotherhood, dialogue, perseverance and peace!" (*Address to the Members of the Palestinian Authority*, Castel Gandolfo, 22 September 1997; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 24 September 1997, p. 1).

9. I am certain that, renewed in the Spirit and faithful to your baptismal promises, you, the Latin Catholics of the Holy Land, can continue to honour your vocation. It is a question of listening to the Lord's call and of not being afraid to answer it despite everything, by a firm commitment: to persevere in your faith in Christ, to witness to the Lord "in deed and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18), in simple joys, in suffering and in your daily problems. It is there that all who in various ways make the Good News visible and concrete will find strength and energy: in their daily work, in their service to society, in education, health care or charitable aid, as well as in the delicate involvement on behalf of justice and peace.

The threefold dimension of harmony, charity and dialogue marks the specific vocation to which this particular Church must respond today. This message I am addressing to her is intended especially to be an encouragement and exhortation to continue the part that the Catholics of the Holy Land have played since 1995, when they initiated a special period of reflection, of renewal in faith and of active presence in their social milieu. Such a commitment draws its strength and motivation from Christ's words spoken in this land itself as he traveled it, "preaching the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Mt 4:23); words of life and love; words of consolation, hope and strength.

The many worthy institutions in your Diocese are and must continue to be at the service of all, without distinction, and especially at the service of the poorest and those who are suffering in body and soul. May God support the efforts of all the Diocese's laity and may the Spirit's active presence help them always to seek constant co-operation with their pastors! May Christ's love spur all consecrated persons in the Diocese to proclaim the Gospel under the leadership of the Patriarch and the Bishops, wherever the Lord has called them to give witness to him: in contemplative communities, in pastoral activities, in schools, in charitable works, in hospitality to pilgrims, in institutes for study and international meetings!

10. Jerusalem is a place of holiness and a preferred destination for pilgrimages. Therefore the Latin Patriarchal Diocese and its Bishops, priests, religious and faithful are a reference point for pilgrims coming to the Holy Land. The latter seek the hospitality they need for prayer and for venerating the Holy Places, but they also wish to find a living and active Church.

This service to the universal Church requires an even greater commitment as the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 approaches. For this occasion, "one thing is certain: everyone is asked to do as much as possible to ensure that the great challenge of the Year 2000 is not overlooked, for this challenge certainly involves a special grace of the Lord for the Church and for the whole of humanity" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 55). The well-known complexity of the situation in the Holy Land requires appropriate preparations, especially in the structures that provide hospitality to pilgrims. But spiritual reflection and prayer will be the true and most important preparation.

In this period your Diocese is especially in harmony with the universal Church and is preparing to receive everyone who, physically or sometimes only spiritually, would like to be a pilgrim in the Holy Land. As you know, I too would like to be a pilgrim with them all, like Pope Paul VI, who wanted "personally to honour, in the Holy Places where Christ was born, lived and died, and, having risen, ascended into heaven, the first mysteries of our salvation: the Incarnation and the Redemption" (*Address of Paul VI for the close of the Second Session of the Council*, 4 December 1963).

11. I entrust this mission of the Diocese, which for centuries has taken special care of the Holy Places, to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Daughter of Zion and Queen of Palestine.

With these sentiments, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to the Patriarch, to all the Pastors and to the faithful of the Patriarchal Diocese of Jerusalem for Latins.

From the Vatican, 28 November 1997.

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