

# NO PEACE FOR A GENERATION

IDAHO CATHOLIC REGISTER

VOI. 52 NO.11 BOISE, IDAHO, OCTOBER 2, 2009

By Michael Brown Editor

## **“Patriarch foresees peace, but not yet”**

BOISE — Those waiting for peace in the Middle East will have to wait for at least another generation, in part because

U.S. and Western interests simply lack the will to make it happen, said retired Patriarch Michel Sabbah.

The patriarch was in Boise to attend the gathering of Northwest Lieutenancy of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher Sept. 24-28. He spoke with the Idaho Catholic Register for about 30 minutes following a public panel on Palestinian peace efforts.

Patriarch Sabbah offered his thoughts on a variety of topics, including his disappointment at the failure of the administration of President Barack Obama to include Palestinians in his vision for Middle East peace and the president’s decision to place peace on the back burner.

“He opened his vision to the Israelis and to the Muslims,” he said, “but along the way, he has forgotten the Christians.”

“This is about the strong imposing its will upon the weak,” the patriarch added, “and the Palestinian Christians are the weak.”

He continued. “Israel is strong, so they say they want this:” The Israelis will allow the Palestinians to have a named state, its own flag and other peripheral signs of statehood, but when it comes to the greater issues of state security and services, “they will always require dependence upon the Israeli government.”

Israel announced in September that it would continue new developments on the West Bank, which led to some U.S.-Israeli tensions. However, the Israeli actions were not addressed publicly in Obama’s Sept. 23 address to the United Nations. Instead, Obama was praised in the build up to the U.N. address for prodding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to meet face to face.

The patriarch had a slightly different view. “The president was saying, ‘You two work it out and get back to me when you are done.’ Essentially, he was saying he had more important things to do. Even Obama gets tired.” Patriarch Sabbah said that in light of continued development by Israel on the West Bank, the opportunity for establishing the “two-state solution” – one Israeli and one Palestinian – is effectively over because “the (Israeli) settlements now occupy all the territory that is worth living in. There is no place left for two states,” he said.

One solution would be to honor the borders established following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and allow any Israelis living within Palestinian territory citizenship in the Palestinian nation.

He criticized Netanyahu for catering to hardliners in the Israeli government, citing the prime minister's previous opposition to reopen negotiations with Palestinian leaders. On Sept. 28, Netanyahu said in a story posted on the Haaretz.com web site that he would not accede to a Palestinian demand to accept the 1967 borders as a condition to renewed peace talks.

Israeli leaders "do not want to solve the problems," Patriarch Sabbah said. "That is the realpolitik of the prime minister."

The patriarch said he is holding out for the next generation of Israeli leaders, those who as youths today are weary of unrest and insecurity and possess an intentional desire for peaceful coexistence. For Palestinians, there are only two courses of actions: either return to acts of violence which will result in more instability in Israel and ultimately more military actions against Palestinians, or patience. "We have had patience for 60 years," said Patriarch Sabbah.

The problem is that more Christians continue to leave the Holy Land out of fear of Israeli attacks. In an area smaller than Idaho's Valley County, the Christian population during the last 60 years has gone from 15 percent to two percent, with only 9,000 Palestinian Christians remaining. The question is whether or not there will still be a significant Christian population when peace arrives.

Patriarch Sabbah said he was pleased by the announcement by Pope Benedict for a Synod of Bishops for the Middle East next October. News reports indicated that among the issues to be discussed will be migration, interreligious dialogue and the church's efforts to promote peace in the region. "Internal stability and politics in the region ... are not something aside" from the state of the faith in Palestine, he said, because "Christians are the first victims of international politics." "The synod will analyze this fact," he added.

Idaho Catholic Register

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