

An excellent article from this week's Tablet, offering a measured perspective on the horrors of what has - and is - taking place in Gaza and Israel, and how we as Catholic Christians might respond...

Fragile seeds of hope

Catholics have spiritual ties and painful shared histories with both the Jewish people and the Palestinians. What might being in solidarity with both look like? / By GAVIN D'COSTA

WHEN I HEARD about the bloodshed and carnage in the Israeli kibbutz of Kfar Aza where Hamas had brutally murdered innocent people, including children, I wept.

Pope Francis was quick to justify Israel's right to defend itself and to call for the immediate release of all the hostages taken by Hamas. Last week, he expressed his concerns about the Israel-Hamas war. War, he said, is always a "defeat". Innocent people die and many suffer. He urged that humanitarian principles must be exercised by all parties concerned. When he added "especially in Gaza", many of my Jewish friends were angry. "Not enough criticism of Hamas," said one.

In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council recognised and condemned the tragic history of antisemitism. But the Church waited until 1998 to apologise formally for failing to take more decisive action to prevent the Holocaust, and to acknowledge that some of its "sons and daughters" had bred the antisemitism that had made it possible.

Like everyone else, I find the sight of the dead bodies of young children being carried out of buildings in Gaza City after Israeli air strikes traumatising, terrifying and tragic. How should Catholics respond to images we have seen in Israel and Gaza - in the midst of the pain and suffering, can we go beyond tears and lamentation, and turn to seeds of hope that are ever more fragile?

Since Vatican II, the Church has taught that the covenant that God has made with the Jewish people is never revoked. This entered the Catechism and is quoted in Francis' *Evangelii gaudium*: "We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.'" The council recognised that the Church has a special relationship with the Jewish people, and a shared spiritual patrimony including Scripture. In 1993 the Holy See formally accepted the Jewish State of Israel as a legal entity.

VATICAN II ALSO opened a new chapter in Catholic-Muslim relations. The Church recognised that Muslims "along with us adore the one and merciful God" and *Nostra aetate* acknowledged the history of antagonism between Muslims and Christians. The Holy See has argued for the rights of the Palestinians to a homeland since 1948. In 2000 it exchanged diplomatic accords with the PLO, and in 2015 it established formal diplomatic relations with the State of Palestine.

The Church has intimate spiritual ties - and painful shared histories - with both the Jewish

people and the Palestinian people. Catholics should be in genuine solidarity with both. Their response to the current war should be shaped both by sympathy and understanding for the Jewish people and their right to a sovereign state, and by sympathy and understanding for the Palestinian people and their right to a sovereign state.

Whether living in Beirut, in Gaza City or in Brooklyn, while Catholics may have different views, they share a common tradition. Catholic Social Teaching condemns war in the modern age as rarely being able to conform to just war principles. But it recognises the rights of people to defend themselves against attack and the rights of people to live securely in a sovereign territory of their own. This means Catholics walk a very difficult tightrope.

Let me tentatively offer some guidelines to help us keep our balance. First, the Church's role as an intermediary and influencer should not be underestimated. While the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See has turned down Cardinal Parolin's offer to mediate in this crisis, the Vatican has deep links with Israelis, with Palestinians and with many other governments and religious leaders who have interests in the Middle East. Understandably, the Church is viewed with suspicion by some Israelis, especially the hard-line religious nationalists in Netanyahu's government. The Church has also built up relations with Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, where some of the oldest surviving communities of Christians live. As long as there is even a faint possibility that it might be asked to act as a mediator, the Church should be willing to serve as a peacemaker.

Second, while appreciating the complex and multilayered backstory to how we arrived at this war, the Church should plead for humanitarian aid for all in need, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Through its aid and development agency Caritas and other partners, Catholics are already giving practical support to ease the suffering of civilians in the conflict, whether they be in Gaza or the West Bank or in Israel. Historically, this has been more visible regarding Palestinians as they are poorer per head of population than Israelis (IMF figures give Israel's per capita income as \$55,000 (£45,000) compared with Gaza's \$1,250).

Third, the conditions that cause the current war must be addressed. This will involve uncomfortable criticisms of both Palestinian and Israeli leaders - and a reminder that how-

ever the current war ends, the only long-term solution is a just settlement for both parties. That will mean the condemnation of the ideology of Hamas and Islamic jihad, its demand to destroy the state of Israel and its willingness to use its own civilian populations as shields; it will mean forthright criticism of the lack of democratic elections for Palestinians and the corruption of their political leaders and institutions. And it will mean condemnation of the illegal settlements supported by Likud and its religious extremist right-wing coalition partners, who subscribe to policies that sometimes eerily echo Hamas: to be rid of every Palestinian on Israel's territory or, at best, to subjugate them.

ISRAEL HAS a right to a sovereign state in the territory of the UN partition plan of 1947, and it has a right to defend itself. Palestinians have a right to a sovereign state, and if these rights are denied and frustrated, resentment and anger will erupt. Traumatic histories generate traumatised generations. If the middle ground of Israeli and Palestinian civic society in the Middle East isn't given oxygen, international political support and long-term structures for negotiation, there will be less hope for the future. It is one of the greatest failings of western powers, who through the UN supported the 1947 two-state solution, that they virtually abandoned serious commit-

ment to the peace process. Recent US administrations have promoted economic pacts between Israel and its Arab neighbours, without clearly staking out how economic stability and prosperity for the Palestinian people will also be achieved.

At a time when populist nationalism is gaining traction like a global epidemic, when the production of military hardware is the most lucrative economy in a starving world and when the super-rich are getting richer faster than their Ferraris, the Church's role - in spite of its weakness and its historic complicity in fanaticism, cowardice and greed - is to repent, to work and to pray so that God's healing grace inaugurates the hope of a common good: "On earth as it is in Heaven."

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