



From Conflict to Communion

Unifying Religious Celebrations among Churches



By Issa Jamil Kassissieh

One of the most important moments I have experienced as Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See was the historic Lutheran-Catholic common prayer for the commemoration of the Reformation that took place on October 31, 2016, in Lund, Sweden. It exemplifies the path His Holiness Pope Francis is determined to follow and the result he strives to achieve.

The signs of progress toward unity among the Churches were already apparent during the pilgrimage of His Holiness Pope Francis to Palestine in 2014. It included his historical encounter with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians worldwide, in our occupied capital, Jerusalem. This was a decisive moment as the heads of Eastern and Western Churches met in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the heart of the Holy City. And it lingers in our minds, given that the aspired aim was the unity of the Word and of the Church, as wished by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The meeting in Lund between His Holiness Pope Francis and His Grace Bishop Munib Younan, a Palestinian refugee who has honored our people by serving as the head of the World Lutheran Federation, was a continuation of our journey on the path towards Christian partnership and unity. Today and during the Christmas season, we rejoice at this historical and decisive moment in the history of the Church.

Ephesians 4:3-4 "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit."



Pope Francis and the head of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Munib Younan, Jerusalem, meeting in Lund, Sweden, for a joint commemoration of the Reformation. Photo courtesy of the Osservatorio Romano Servizio Fotografico (Vatican Press).

During the last few years, we have witnessed in Palestine, and particularly in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, how the heads of Churches have agreed to rehabilitate both the Church of the Nativity that was in a dire state and the Holy Tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Today, due to these agreements and understandings, the various Churches are continuing to walk along the path toward unity. As Palestinians, we are proud to contribute to the restoration of both

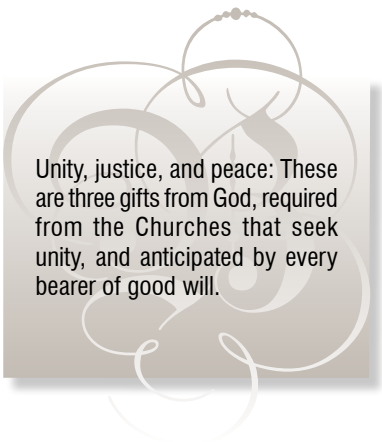
churches, which also form an integral part of Palestinian national heritage. Associated efforts include the formation of a presidential committee to lead the restoration of the Nativity Church. This year, after 500 years of severed ties, the Lutheran and Catholic churches have met and have turned their conflict into an effort toward cooperation. In 2014, the Orthodox and Catholic churches did the same. I am hopeful for accelerated steps so that a united Church would meet to pray in one united ecumenical

prayer at the place where our Lord Jesus Christ was born, and where he taught and established the first Church.

Palestine has presented the world with a strong message of unity between various faiths. It serves as an example for the rest of our region of the ways in which Christians and Muslims celebrate together Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. President Abbas attends all three Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem: Catholic, Orthodox, and Armenian. In fact, in the last few years we have witnessed positive initiatives by the various Christian denominations in different parts in the Holy Land to celebrate Christmas together according to the Western calendar and Easter according to the Eastern calendar. It is our wish and hope that the unity of the celebrations would reach Jerusalem very soon so that we would be able to participate together in the processions in the heart of the Christian quarter with all our scouts.

As a Palestinian, a Christian, and a Jerusalemite, I aspire – just like the vast majority of my people – to symbolize unity in practice as well as in spirit. In fact, it is the strong wish and desire of the various Christian communities to celebrate Christmas and Easter united in one spirit, the spirit of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his crucifixion in Jerusalem. We also hope to reunify both cities, currently separated by networks of illegal Israeli settlements, walls, and checkpoints.

We are living in sensitive times regarding the existence and presence of Christianity since many Christians have left due to political uncertainty and economic stagnation amidst concerns of the rise of fundamental groups in the region. Within this context, the unity of the Churches is crucial for the future of Christians in our region. As Palestinians will soon reach their fiftieth year under Israeli occupation, such signs of unity will bring hope



Unity, justice, and peace: These are three gifts from God, required from the Churches that seek unity, and anticipated by every bearer of good will.

to the oldest Christian community in the world. Let us hope that the light of justice and peace and the power of logic will shine and radiate from Palestine, the Holy Land, to include the Middle East and entire world. This is God's will. It is the message of each believer in the Holy Land.

Let us strive to achieve unity between the Churches as a key element to ensure the continued existence of Oriental Christianity in Palestine, a treasure that makes the Palestinian people proud. The challenges are tremendous and the number of Palestinian Christians is dwindling. The Israeli occupation authority's confiscation of lands from 52 Christian families in Beit Jala/Cremisan is a recipe for the Christian exodus from Palestine and one example of the tremendous challenges that threaten the very existence of Christianity in the Holy Land. The living stones of Palestine deserve no less than to enjoy justice, tranquility, equality, and love in the land of peace, Palestine, the Holy Land.

Currently serving as the Palestinian Ambassador to the Holy See, Issa Jamil Kassissieh served as one of the diplomatic advisers to the late Faisal Husseini during his time as head of the Orient House. Upon the election of President Abbas, he joined the office of the president as an adviser in diplomatic affairs. He has held the position of deputy head of the Negotiations Affairs Department. Today, he serves as Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See.