

Michel Sabbah

A Voice in the Wilderness

By David M. Neuhaus SJ

Michel Sabbah, Palestinian, Catholic, bishop, and intellectual, was born in Nazareth, the city of the Annunciation, in Palestine on March 19, 1933. At the age of 10, he was sent to the Roman Catholic seminary in the town of Beit Jala to study at the minor seminary. In 1948, he was separated from his family who remained in what became the state of Israel as he continued his studies in the West Bank, which had been annexed by Jordan. After years of preparation, he was ordained to the priesthood in Nazareth in 1955. As a young priest, he served in Madaba in Jordan and afterwards was appointed to teach in the seminary. After serving as director of the schools and as a priest in Djibouti, Sabbah completed a doctorate in Arabic linguistics, studying at both Saint Joseph's University in Beirut and the Sorbonne in Paris. From 1980 until 1988, while based in Jordan, he was president of Bethlehem University.

It was at the beginning of the first Intifada against the Israeli occupation that Sabbah was appointed as the first Palestinian Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. In those eventful years, his leadership, both in the church and in civil society, was noteworthy, a prophetic voice for justice and peace. He promoted nonviolent resistance to the occupation and joined forces with all oppressed Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, in working for an end to the occupation. As patriarch, Sabbah published a series of pastoral letters that discussed the important issues that faced Christian Palestinians and the whole church, elaborating on faith within a situation of injustice. He was particularly active in fostering dialogue and collaboration among the Christian churches as well as with Muslims, also seeking ways to dialogue with progressive Jews who were working for justice and peace for all. In 1991, he established the Society of Saint Yves, a Catholic organization for human rights and legal aid.

In his long years as Latin Patriarch, Sabbah was universally recognized for his efforts to promote the cause of justice and peace for Palestinians and all peoples in the Middle East. After a long mandate as patriarch, he retired at the age of 75 in 2008. Rather than rest, however, Sabbah has remained a vibrant and engaged intellectual and activist. He was involved in the drafting of the Kairos Palestine document, has travelled widely to speak in international forums, and continues to head the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, a think tank that addresses the issues that face the church in Israel/Palestine today.

