

The Pope, Israel and 'Reconciliation'

Gaza Disowned

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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" Gaza is not on the Pope's itinerary, nor will it be. There will be no change in these plans. But I'll say it very clearly, the Pope is absolutely not going to Gaza ."

Such were the astounding comments made by the Pope's spokesman in Israel , Wadie Abunasser, prior to Pope Benedict XVI visiting Palestine and Israel .

As if there was no massacre in Gaza , no families entirely slaughtered, no human rights violated to match the record of the most grisly of crimes in modern history. As if Gaza were a mere irritant in the annals of human suffering. More, as if there were no Catholic flock in Gaza . To clarify, there are actually nearly 2,000 Catholics in Gaza , apparently not important enough for the 'cut'.

Now, there are a lot of important religious sites to see around the Holy Land, lots of old churches, stones, ruins and the like...sites of much more significance, such as the Western Wall, the Holy Sepulcher and so on... far more important than visiting the site of a fresh massacre, where the stench of rotting bodies – laid to rest beneath a tomb consisting of the rubble of their own homes – has just faded. Such sites are apparently of little import to the Holy See. Rather, there are memorials to victims of greater standing, in shrines of superior grandeur, such as Yad Vashem...now, that's something to see.

On a trip that was apparently dedicated to promoting "reconciliation", it is baffling that Pope Benedict made little mention of the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a source of discord. Imagine that. But what he did say was, "Allow me to make this appeal to all the peoples of these lands: No more bloodshed! No more fighting! No more terrorism! No more war! Instead let us break the viscous circle of violence."

As if he was imploring two nations with common grievances, with mutually strong armies and nuclear arsenals. As if he were exhorting two peoples, both of which have access to clean water, both of which are properly nourished and educated. Or to put it another way, as if both peoples face the daily threat of their house being toppled while they are held up inside by an occupying army, as if both peoples face the daily threat of arrest, extra-judicial execution, the humiliation of curfews and checkpoints.

The Vatican needs some serious introspection. It ought to replace its highly politicized and, frankly, questionable apologies, with an earnest apology to oppressed people, who might have little political worth. The Pope should apologize to Palestinians and to Gazans in particular for failing to appreciate the seriousness of their plight, for cozying up to the very

Israeli leaders who champion the suffering in Gaza , and fail to console the very victim of their onslaught.

More, as an institution that has garnered the reputation of advocating social justice throughout the world in recent years, the Catholic Church must abandon its current course, cowering before Israeli leaders, its Holy Father imparting such smug condescension on a nation that has endured a slow and gradual process of genocide for the past six decades.

Wishy-washy is the term that comes to mind. While he never wavered from condemning the “godless nation” that carried out the Holocaust, his references to Israel ’s illegal occupation of Palestine were so indistinct, that it was difficult to make any clear separation between the aggressor and the victim. As he witnessed with his own eyes the monstrosity of the Apartheid Wall, his comments were painfully elusive, “How earnestly we pray for an end to the hostilities that have caused this wall to be built.” Oh really? Is this all the Holy Father has to say? Never mind occupation. Never mind hunger. Never mind randomly closing schools for months on end and denying an entire nation the right to education. But now we are talking about illegal weapons being used on civilian populations in Gaza . Now we are talking about a wall that has been declared “illegal” by the International Court of Justice. There is simply no time or place here for indecisiveness and moral flexibility.

And it is completely unacceptable for anyone to have the ‘audacity’ to urge Palestinian youth not to allow, as the Holy Father stated, “the loss of life and the destruction you have witnessed to arouse bitterness or resentment in your hearts”. More, when making a stop at Aida Refugee Camp, he blamed the plight of the displaced population on “the turmoil that has afflicted this land for decades.” It would have been far more favorable for him to stay home and not insult these sites of misery at all.

But in the end, the Pope finally was able to muster up some courage and took one truly audacious stand: When at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, the Palestinian Authority’s chief Islamic judge, Sheikh Tayseer Rajab Tamimi, declared that Israelis had killed innocent women and children in Gaza, the Pope stood up and in an act of defiance, walked out. Now that’s courage.

The Palestinians, and millions of people around the world, expected more from a person who should be advocating the New Testament teaching: “let justice flow like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

But the Pope has proven fallible, after all.

Ramzy Baroud (www.ramzybaroud.net) is an author and editor of PalestineChronicle.com. His work has been published in many newspapers, journals and anthologies around the world. His latest book is, “The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People’s Struggle” (Pluto Press, London), and his forthcoming book is, “My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza ’s Untold Story” (Pluto Press, London)

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