

## Reflections on pilgrimage to the Holy Land

By Bishop Richard Pates

Oct. 13, 2014

Catholic bishops are locals. We lead local churches, such as the Diocese of Des Moines. But my tenure as chair of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace has given me the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective, almost always from that of the vast number of people in the world who live in conditions few Americans have experienced or would ever choose. The experience clearly doesn't make me an international expert, but it has provided insights which I would like to share.

I recently led a delegation of 18 U.S. bishops on a "Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace to the Holy Land." We are people of prayer and believe in its benefits, so it's natural that much of our time was spent praying with fellow believers in Israel and Palestine. We also wanted to show our solidarity with the people of the region and met with many ordinary Israelis and Palestinians as well as with ecumenical partners – Greek and American Orthodox, Lutherans, Jews and Muslims - and had meetings with the prime minister of Palestine, a Palestinian legislative member, the head of World Jewish Affairs, a New York-born rabbi, a U.S. counsel general and former Israeli president, Shimon Peres.

The most moving experience for me was the time four fellow bishops and I spent in Gaza, just 10 days after the cease fire that ended the tragic bombing of that enclave. We celebrated Mass in a Catholic parish and visited Mother Theresa's sisters, who provide homes for disabled children. We visited with the heroic staff of Catholic Relief Services, who stayed in their posts throughout the bitter 50-day bombardment.

The devastation we saw in Gaza, already a deprived and depressed Palestinian enclave on the eastern Mediterranean coast, was extensive and ruinous. Most of the bombing occurred in residential areas, and residents said warnings were provided by the Israelis only seconds before bombs fell. The destruction of homes was especially heart-rending because for most Gazan families, home ownership requires generations to acquire.

Gaza is an extremely poor, closed area, meaning that no one can leave either to Israel on one side or Egypt on the other. The territory is 25 miles long and from 3.7 to 7.5 miles wide, with a total area of 141 square miles. Around 1.8 million people live there in what some have described as "an open prison."

Since there were no places to hide during the bombing, according to a Catholic Relief Services employee living there, people – including a large number of women and children – poured into the streets when the nightly bombing began, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries. Around 2,300 Gazans are said to have lost their lives during the recent mini-war, compared to around 80 Israelis, about 70 of which were military personnel.

Most of my fellow bishops and I had conflicting feelings during the trip. We feel a natural and historical connection with Israel since Jews are our ancestors in the faith, and empathize with Israelis' need for security. But we couldn't help but feel compassion for the Palestinians, who not only suffered disproportionately from the recent war but whose lives are continually restricted and interrupted, and sometimes cut short, by the Israelis.

We met with people there on both sides, however, who yearn for peace and who work for it by trying to bridge the gap among Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. Sadly, the birthplace of the Prince of Peace is riddled with contradictions that have so far limited those efforts. In a statement released after our trip, the bishops agreed that the following "signs of contradiction" are among the obstacles that must be overcome to attain peace.

- Economic inequality between the populations of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Israelis, and the towering wall separating them as its harsh symbol. "In crossing the border one moves from freedom and prosperity to the intimidation of military check points, humiliation and deeper poverty," our statement says.
- Exaggerated Israeli security measures that make it difficult for Palestinians and non-Jews to make a living and conduct normal lives. Israeli policies in East Jerusalem, for instance, prohibit Christians who marry someone from outside the city to remain there with their spouse. As a result of the security measures and ongoing

violence, Christians are emigrating from their historic home in vast numbers. Once 12.5 percent of the population, Christians now constitute 1.5 percent.

- Continued establishment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and elsewhere. Besides confiscating and destroying Palestinian property, the practice threatens peace efforts and the security of Palestinians, and ultimately, of Israelis.
- The extreme violence on both sides. Violence “always sows seeds of further violence and fear,” our statement says. Besides the devastation inflicted on Gaza, Israelis in the southern city of Sderot told a group of our bishops about their dread of continued rocket attacks from Palestinians in Gaza.

It’s true that we found much skepticism, and even cynicism, in what – perhaps ironically – we call the Holy Land. But we also saw signs of hope, and our joint statement reinforces the view of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican that we should continue to pursue a two-state solution. It holds, we believe, the best chance for creating a secure and recognized Israel living in peace with a viable and independent Palestinian state.

This view may sound naïve to people who have for decades followed disappointing attempts at resolution, but there is simply no rational alternative to continued, albeit tortured, negotiations.

Former President Peres during our visit expressed his admiration for, and trust in, Pope Francis, with whom he has met four times. And Pope Francis’ reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have focused on one basic fact: We are all created by one God and belong to one human family. We are, therefore, brothers and sisters.