



# ICCJ response to a disquieting Easter message from Jerusalem

19.04.2001 | Rev. Friedhelm Pieper, General Secretary, International Council of Christians and Jews

## **Letter to Dr Naim Ateek in his capacity as President of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem**

Heppenheim - At a time of increased tension between Israel and the Palestinians, a time when responsible religious leadership ought to weigh its language with double sensitivity, the ICCJ regrets that in his Easter Message to all the Christian Churches in the region Dr Naim Ateek in his capacity as President of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem included passages that are reminiscent of medieval portrayal of Jews and Judaism. In Ateek's Easter Message one is being confronted with statements like:

'In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge Golgotha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull. '

While the ICCJ shares Dr Ateek's expression of hope that 'In the midst of this hopeless and confusing situation, we refuse to give in to despair', affirming faith in God that does not allow to lose hope that there will be liberation for all the people of the land, the ICCJ takes strong exception to such deeply disquieting misuse of language, if not abuse of Christian religious tradition.

ICCJ General Secretary Rev Friedhelm Pieper has therefore responded as follows:

### **To Dr Naim Ateek**

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center

***Dear Dr Ateek,***

In my capacity as General Secretary of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) allow me to respond to your Easter message as published at Sabeel's Web site, which caused some discussion including also sharp criticism.

The ICCJ and its membership worldwide have for more than fifty years been engaged in a Christian-Jewish dialogue that has sought to overcome an age-old tradition of estrangement, fear and mistrust based on and supported by the language of contempt. We have also extended this dialogue to include Muslims.

Let me therefore start by expressing our heartfelt sympathy for all the people suffering in the Holy Land, children, women and men, Palestinians and Israelis. Our hearts are with their families and our prayers are that they may experience no more pain and bloodshed. The ongoing violence creates a desperate, deeply inhumane and unbearable situation for everyone living in your region. Every effort needs to be made to overcome this ever growing violence and to make space again for the restoration of a civilized living as neighbours, a non-violent living together as Israelis and Palestinians.

We appreciate the recent Easter message of the 13 different Christian Churches and Communions in Jerusalem stating that peace in the Holy Land can only be restored 'through mutual reconciliation based on respect for the dignity and value God has given to all human beings'.

We appreciate that these Christian leaders call upon 'all secular and political authorities to welcome into their hearts the good will and good faith that build new generations with renewed hope and sustained confidence'. We share the conviction of other concerned religious people that all religious authorities and institutions are called to do their utmost to pray for peace and overcoming violence. They are also called to seek non-violent ways to deal with the conflicting interests regarding a just settlement between the Palestinian and the Israeli societies.

It is obvious that in this respect all messages blaming responsibility for the current situation and its growing violence solely on the other party to the conflict, be they the Palestinians or the Israelis, will not help. It is in this respect that we find your Easter message problematic. It appears to contribute to a very unbalanced and distorted perception of the situation. And it uses Christian tradition to give religious legitimization this distortion.

In our long established dialogue activities we have not shrunk from countering attempts to lay the blame for the current severe crisis and all the suffering it entails solely on the Palestinians. In the same vein we also oppose other one-sided messages especially when they abuse religious traditions. And this is what we find in your Easter message.

We hope and pray that Israelis and Palestinians will find ways to overcome this desperate situation of pain and bloodshed. That they will seek other ways to arrive at a longed for just solution for a humane and civilized life in an independent Palestinian state as a peaceful neighbour of Israel living without regular attacks.

May the holidays of Ramadan, Pesach and Easter next year find a Jerusalem free from the current ongoing sufferings!

*Yours sincerely,*

Rev. Friedhelm Pieper

General Secretary, International Council of Christians and Jews