This war is also a turning point in interreligious dialog

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Statement by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa OFM, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, at the press conference ‘A conflagration in the Middle East: On the situation of Christians in the Holy Land’ at the Autumn Plenary Assembly of the German Bishops' Conference on 25 September 2024 in Fulda.

Most Reverend Excellencies,
Dearest friends,
Dear brothers and sisters,
may the Lord give you peace!

I have been asked to briefly describe the situation in which we currently find ourselves. It is not easy to briefly describe what we are experiencing without getting superficial and uncomplete. I will therefore not present the chronicle of events. I think you already know them from the media, which show images and stories of violence and pain every day. Nor will I present a political view of the situation, which would probably only lead to misunderstandings. I will only briefly explain how we as Christians, how the Church is experiencing this time and what she is doing.

From October 7 until today, we have been caught up in the turmoil of events and have experienced death, destruction, violence, resentment and the desire for revenge. While we try, with God’s help, to be a bridge, to mediate and to hold on to the last hope of negotiations by a thread, the political situation on the ground seems to be getting worse and worse. The two populations, Israeli and Palestinian, are increasingly fragmented, the political leadership is contested in both camps and mistrust between them is growing. To make a long story short: Unfortunately, it does not look like there are any short-term prospects for peace. After Gaza, the escalation of the conflict on the northern border with Lebanon is becoming ever clearer. This is the news of these days which we all know.

Our people are in the grip of fear, of uncertainty about the future. Many have only ruins before them. Moreover, the current severe crisis has not only destroyed the easy prospects of peace and trust in a short time, but has also cancelled years of interfaith dialog, of painstaking relationship building between different religious and social communities. The political crisis has also affected the religious communities, whose leaders have not been able to meet or talk to each other for 11 months. Everyone is now trapped in their own context of life, within their respective communities, trapped in their own pain, often angry, disappointed and without trust. A rabbi in the 1960s, Heschel, said that no religion is an island. At the moment, I have the impression that we have become a bit of an island again, that we are only looking after ourselves.

It is therefore clear to all that a new beginning must be made to rebuild the social fabric destroyed by the war, with patience and in the knowledge that the timeframe for healing these wounds will necessarily be long, will require complex paths, but will nevertheless definitely be necessary. It must be recognized that the words justice, truth, reconciliation and forgiveness cannot be mere wishes, as perhaps they have been until now, but must find real lived contexts with a common interpretation and become credible and desired expressions again, without which it will be difficult to think of a different future. We will have to believe that, despite everything, it is possible to have a different future from the one that war and violence are currently predicting.

It must be said that there is an ongoing debate and different interpretations of the events. For some, the novelty lies only in the intensity of the events since October 7, but not in their dynamics, which have instead been the same since 1948. For others, however, October 7 is absolutely new. This shows how great the differences between the parties are. In any case, the images in the media and on our cell phones since October 7 are full of images of blood, destruction and death, but also of hatred, revenge and resentment, where everyone feels like a victim, the only victim of this whole tsunami of hatred that has swept over us. This is perhaps one of the difficulties of our time, at least in the Holy Land. One's own heart is so full, flooded, torn by pain that there is no room for the pain of others. Everyone sees themselves as the victim, the only victim of this heinous war. We want and demand empathy for our own situation and often we feel betrayed, or at least failed, when we hear others express feelings of understanding for those different from us. A situation that is hurtful in every way. Perhaps it would be best to remain silent in the face of all this. But even if silence is still appropriate, today a word is required of me that I cannot refrain from saying.

1. A question of language

Much has been said in recent months about the inhumanity of this war (as indeed all wars are), inhumanity in the acts carried out, which the images have clearly shown. Indeed, there were and are images that leave one stunned by their cruelty and the pain they cause. And behind these images, which say more than millions of words, there are real, concrete, tangible situations. So, they are not reconstructions or fakes. What happened on October 7 in southern Israel and what is happening now in the Gaza Strip is a deep wound to the sense of humanity, to respect for the person. I have met people, Israelis and Palestinians, who are affected by these situations, deeply hurt, humiliated, but also in need of words of closeness, compassion and understanding.

In these encounters, I have felt that it is not enough to assure them that everything possible is being done to help and support them from a humanitarian point of view, which has indeed been done. I think of our Christians who are trapped in our churches in Gaza and who are also so wounded and affected. It was not enough to provide them with the necessary humanitarian aid. They needed a word that expressed closeness. I realized how necessary it is not only to ensure that our diocesan offices do their part, but also to be there with a word of encouragement, but even more so of guidance and direction in a context that seems to be characterized by utter hopelessness. The images and words of pain and hatred must be answered with images and words of hope and light.

In short, you have to have the courage to speak. You must not only say what you think, but also think about what you say and be aware that words carry a decisive weight, especially in such delicate situations. In particular, those who bear public responsibility have a duty to lead their respective communities with appropriate language that is capable of expressing feelings and common perceptions on the one hand, but also of guiding thought and, if necessary, limiting the drift of hatred and mistrust that often runs rampant in the media with ease, with words that are like arrows that strike at the heart. We must not chase the tide, but know how to steer it, while also taking responsibility for misunderstandings and loneliness. In short, we must maintain a sense of humanity, first and foremost in language, in private and in public, when using social media, which has a disruptive effect on public opinion and at the same time does not allow depth and perspective for situations as complex as the one we are currently experiencing. Language creates opinion, thoughts, can stir up hope, but also hatred. Humanity, i.e. the need to remain human, to maintain a sense of respect for the dignity of human beings, their right to life and justice, begins with language. Violent, aggressive language, laden with hatred and contempt, rejection and exclusion, in short, is not a side issue in this war, but one of the main tools in this and too many other wars. Using terms that deny the humanity of the other, wherever they come from, is also a form of violence that can open up or perhaps even justify the choice of violence in many other

contexts and forms. These are expressions that perhaps hurt even more than massacres and bombs.

God created the world with the word (“Let there be…”). We too create our world with our words. We have seen this in a very sensitive and hard way in these months. But if we look closely, we may have recognized it even earlier. How often over the years have we had to be careful not to use certain words in one context that were common in another, and vice versa. Each side, Israeli and Palestinian, had its own vocabulary, its own narrative, different and independent of each other. That they never met, except in small inner circles. On the Israeli side, for example, the vocabulary revolved around the concept of security. On the other side, it was all about occupation and justice. To be clear, these words are sacrosanct, reflect a genuine reality and necessity, and deserve respect. The problem was that they were narratives that were independent of each other and never really met. And this has become explosively clear in recent months.

What we need is the courage to use non-exclusive language. Which, even in the harshest conflicts and contradictions, preserves a firm and clear sense of humanity, because however much we may distort it through our own bad behavior, we all always remain human beings created in the image of God. It is therefore necessary, in public and in private, in the media, in synagogues, churches and mosques, to have the courage to use words that open horizons and do not provide an excuse for violence and rejection. The same applies to the media, the social media, which are becoming increasingly important, and to educational institutions such as universities. Is this not ultimately the Church’s greatest contribution in our situation, namely, to provide a language that can create a new world that is not yet visible but is on the horizon?

2. A conflict that is also spiritual

This war is clearly affecting the spiritual life of the inhabitants of the Holy Land. What is happening cannot leave those who care about spiritual life indifferent. In the Holy Land, faith and religion are crucial to the lives of the various communities, Christians, Muslims and Jews. What role do religions and faith play in this conflict that is having a devastating impact on the lives of all? It seems that the words of the Spirit have no influence on the decisions that are being made at this time. This raises questions. In Dt. 30:15, God says, “*Behold, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil... Choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live*”. We must take note of the fact that it is still possible not to choose life and good and that we must ask and answer the question of how we stand before these choices of evil and death. This is not an abstract question, and it is one that concerns many believers. How can we as believers stand in the face of these choices for death and violence?

Indeed, it must be admitted that there is one major absence in this war: the word of religious local leaders. With a few exceptions, we have not heard any speeches, reflections or prayers from religious leaders in recent months that differ from those of other political or social leaders. One has the impression that each of them speaks exclusively from the perspective of their own community. Jews with Jews, Muslims with Muslims, Christians with Christians, and so on. It seems that they all preserve and reinforce the narrative of their own community, often against the other.

In recent months, for example, it has been and still is almost impossible to hold interfaith meetings, at least at a public level. Religious Jews, Christians and Muslims are not able to meet, not even to express their disagreements. Interfaith relations that seemed to be solidified now seem to be swept away by a dangerous sense of mistrust. Each feel betrayed by the other, not understood, not defended, not supported.

I have asked myself several times in recent months whether belief in God is really the source of personal thought and conscience formation, creating a common understanding among us believers

on at least some key issues of social life, or whether our thinking is shaped by and based on something else. In other words, I ask myself whether in my actions and words I fear more God or the reaction of people, politicians, the media... When I turn to my community, do I have the courage to parrhesia? Do I open up horizons? Or am I simply weighing up my words so as not to upset anyone? This is not a trivial question. I would even say it is of central importance. It is precisely in these contexts of pain and disorientation, in a context where religion plays such a prominent public role, that one must never stop asking oneself whether and how faith can orient one's community, to invite it to question itself without closing itself in its own comfort zones. Faith must be a support, but in some ways also a disruptive element. If faith is based on an experience of transcendence, it must also lead the mind to transcend the present moment and open the boundaries of the mind and heart to go beyond it. Indeed, believers can focus their anger and grief in prayer. They should look upward and realize that God is ultimately calling them to look to the other who is made in His image.

This war is also a turning point in interreligious dialog, which can no longer be the same, at least not between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

The Jewish world did not feel supported by the Christians and expressed this clearly. The Christians, on the other hand, divided as always about everything and unable to find a common word, stood apart, if not divided about supporting one side or the other, or unsure and confused. Muslims feel attacked and believe that they are in cahoots with the October 7 massacres... In short, after years of interfaith dialog, we have not understood each other. For me personally, this is a great pain, but also a great lesson.

Based on this experience, we will have to start anew, in the awareness that religions also play a central role in orientation, and that the dialog between us must perhaps take an important step and start from our current lack of understanding, our differences, our wounds. It can no longer just be a dialog between members of Western culture, as has been the case until now, but it must take into account the different sensitivities, the different cultural approaches, not just the European ones, but above all the local ones. This is much more difficult, but we have to start from there. And it must be done, not out of necessity or need, but out of love. Because despite our differences, we love each other, and we want this goodness to be concretely expressed not only in our own lives, but also in our respective communities. Loving one another does not necessarily mean having the same opinions, but knowing how to express and value them, and respecting and welcoming one another.

3. The reflection and action of the Church

In this complex context, our Church has been reflecting for some time on how we as faithful Christians can live in this conflict; a reflection that is constructive and at the same time truthful and real, that does not fall into hackneyed slogans or obvious platitudes. The conflict and its consequences affect the lives of all people in our diocese and is therefore an integral part of the life of the Church and her pastoral care. Everything we are and do is directly and indirectly related to the conflict and its consequences, from the most practical aspects to thinking about more complex issues. What I am trying to say is that conflict is not a passing and secondary issue in the life of our Church, but is today an integral and constitutive part of our identity as a Church: conflict and division, with the consequences of hatred and resentment, are an everyday reality that we have had to reckon with for several generations and that requires of the Christian community a continuous path of reflection and spiritual, pastoral and social elaboration. For us, therefore, to speak of peace is not to speak of an abstract issue, but of a deep wound in the life of the Christian community, which causes suffering and weariness and deeply affects all our human and spiritual lives.

I do not know if we have reached a synthesis in the interpretation of this theme, probably not yet. I

think that reflecting on the witness of peace will always be an ongoing work for us, we will never have a complete and final discourse, but we must reckon with the continuous developments of the various political frameworks that are gradually forming and dissolving, and with their impact on the lives of people in the Holy Land. Situations that constantly call our faith into question. And perhaps now is not even the time for synthesis, but for listening. To listen to the different voices, feelings and visions and to try to read them in the light of the Gospel. The Christian message is based on the Gospel and on Jesus. We cannot escape the person of Jesus. Our reflections as the Church of the Holy Land cannot therefore escape the teaching of Jesus, who taught us that forgiveness, justice and truth are the basis of peace.

It is therefore the task of the Church of the Holy Land to base her ecclesial pastoral ministry on this teaching and to bring these words - forgiveness, justice, truth, peace - into a constant, difficult, painful, complex, grueling and tiring dialog with one another. But it is a process that is fruitful and respects the rights of God and of people, and that gradually builds a genuine perspective of peace in the times that we do not have. Because what sustains the actions of the Church is not ideology, but love. “The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (*Rom.* 5:5). It is this love that is the soul of our desire for peace. Nothing else.

But it is not enough just to talk, we must also act and be present where people are suffering and in need. If our words are not accompanied by concrete actions to help people, we run the risk of only giving them good wishes and nothing more. For this reason, the Church of the Holy Land is present in her various institutions, such as the Custody of the Holy Land, and works concretely to help people.

Our Christian community is small in number, but spread throughout the Holy Land: in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Israel.

The situation in Gaza is the most difficult. There are only just over six hundred Christians left in the north of the Strip, in Gaza City. All of them are gathered in the two church complexes, the Catholic Holy Family and the Orthodox St. Porphyrius. All their homes have been destroyed. In Gaza, more than 80 percent of the houses have been destroyed and the entire infrastructure has also been destroyed: no water, no electricity and no other services. In the north of the Strip, where we are working and the Christian community is, there is only one small, partially functioning hospital for a remaining population of around 600,000 people. The population is dependent on outside help in every respect, starting with food.

Our Christians cook for everyone in a communal kitchen a few times a week. And what is cooked has to be enough for the whole week. Last week they were able to eat meat, and that was the first time they had seen meat since Easter. There is a lack of complete nutrition. Fruit and vegetables are very hard to come by. And this particularly affects the most vulnerable population groups, such as children.

Another emergency concerns the schools. Last school year was canceled. And it will probably be the same this year. All the schools have either been destroyed or are being used as emergency shelters for displaced families. Before the war, the community had four functioning schools. Now they are destroyed. We are trying to reopen at least one of the schools so that our children can learn again. This is a dramatic situation for many families.

With the help of various organizations, we are trying to provide a few thousand families with food and medical care. Every two weeks we try to distribute 20 tons of food and essential goods amidst no less difficulties related to the ongoing military conflict. This is what we can do and what we must do. In the coming weeks, we will also open small clinics to provide medical care. It’s not much, but it’s what we can do at this time. We cannot stand idly by and watch this drama that seems to have no end.

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In the West Bank, especially in the Bethlehem area, where many Christians live, the situation is not as dramatic as in Gaza, but economically it is certainly very difficult. Pilgrimage and religious tourism, one of the most important sources of income for the population, has come to a complete standstill, leaving hundreds of families without work for 11 months. Before the war, there were over a hundred thousand Palestinian workers who traveled to Israel every day to work. Apart from a few permits, they are now almost all at home with no clear prospects of future recovery. Indeed, the deep mistrust between the Palestinian and Israeli populations will not allow an easy return to the previous situation.

Clashes between Israeli settlers and Palestinian groups are also becoming increasingly frequent in the northern West Bank. You have probably read about the clashes in Jenin and the surrounding villages. Our small community in Jenin is also partially affected. Of course, everyone there is at home and has no short-term job prospects. The fear is that this kind of new intifada will spread to the entire West Bank. That would be dramatic.

In the northern West Bank, schools have been able to start the school year only last week, with a delay of a month, due to the ongoing clashes and violence.
But I do not want to forget here the Israeli victims, the victims of October 7, a terrible and unimaginable massacre, and also how many of them have died in the last months, until last week, whose impact on the population is very deep and painful. There are also displaced people in Israel, especially in the north of the country, because of the rockets fired daily by Hezbollah. As I said at the beginning, this is the chronicle of these days.

In short, violence is incessant, and wherever it comes from, it must be condemned. Violence only provokes more violence, a vicious circle with no end in sight. And everyone’s pain must be respected, without establishing hierarchies.

It is not easy to get out of this spiral of violence. The regional context remains very tense and problematic. As we know, negotiations are underway to release the hostages and achieve a ceasefire. But the prospects of a successful conclusion to the negotiations remain very weak. And this leads us to believe - in the hope that we are wrong - that the end of the conflict is not close, and that we will have to deal with this terrible situation for a long time.

In any case, the prospects of peace in the short to medium term are not credible, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations. For there to be any prospect of peace, there must be clear and solid conditions: a political leadership with vision, capable of uniting their respective populations, supported by the religious leadership and the social institutions, and a regional context that supports this process. None of these conditions exist today. This difficult situation, therefore, will continue for a long time.

But we must not give up. Never give up. The Church will not be able to solve the major political problems of the Middle East and the Holy Land. But, as I said a moment ago, she is not giving up on remaining in the Holy Land, speaking a word of truth and reconciliation and promoting an action of help and closeness to all.

4. Crossing the barrier, every beyond hope

I am convinced that we must direct our steps along such a path. For the prophecy of peace to become a reality, it is essential to educate ourselves to respect, encounter, dialog and forgiveness. Everyone, Jews, Muslims and Christians, must first and foremost be credible witnesses of hope because they are convinced of God’s goodness towards all people. One cannot live without hope. Today there is more fear than hope. Fear is confronted with the weapons of faith and prayer. This is the time for hope. I believe that the antidote to violence and despair, wherever it comes from, is

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to create hope, to educate for hope and peace. Schools and universities have a key role to play here: this is where we must begin to educate people for peace and non-violence, i.e. to believe, to know and appreciate each other and, above all, to meet each other, which unfortunately is not happening at the moment. Rather, the direction is the opposite: to distance ourselves from each other. Being prophets of peace means focusing our attention on the drama of both peoples, Israeli and Palestinian. We must learn to love both, to see them as neighbors and friends. Only in this way will walls fall and new bridges be built, capable of “a love that transcends the boundaries of geography and space” (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, No. 1).

We are called, even in times of war, to multiply gestures of fraternity, peace, welcome, forgiveness and reconciliation. I want to say more: we must all commit ourselves, starting with myself and those who, like me, have responsibility for social, political and religious leadership and direction, to create a “yes mentality” against the “strategy of no”. Saying yes to good, yes to peace, yes to dialog, yes to the other must not be mere rhetoric, but a responsible commitment that is willing to create space rather than occupy it, to find a place for the other and not to deny them.

There is a Christian way of living in the Middle East. There is a Christian way of experiencing war. Jesus is not a guerrilla fighter, as some would like to portray him. He is not a zealot or theologian of revolution, like Barabbas, but he brought the real revolution: Not to “water down” the kingdom of God in the world, but to give it salt, flavor, meaning, from divine and heavenly realities. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it.

As Church we have little opportunity to sit at international tables, but we have the duty to contribute to the life of the world, building communities that are reconciled and welcoming, that are open and ready for encounters, authentic spaces of shared fraternity and sincere dialog.

The Gospel calls us to do this.

Source: German Bishops' Conference. See the special dossier on the website of the Bishops' Conference "Krieg im Heiligen Land" ("War in the Holy Land") with several contributions, including the one by Cardinal Pizzaballa reproduced here.

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