



Jerusalem: The Catholic Church and the Holy City

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Pope Francis spoke about Jerusalem at his general audience on December 6, 2017, just a few hours before US President Donald Trump affirmed that his government recognizes Jerusalem as “the capital of Israel”. Pope Francis said:

“I cannot remain silent about my deep concern for the situation that has developed in recent days and, at the same time, I wish to make a heartfelt appeal to ensure that everyone is committed to respecting the status quo of the city, in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the United Nations.” He noted that “Jerusalem is a unique city, sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, where the Holy Places for the respective religions are venerated, and it has a special vocation to peace... I pray to the Lord that such identity be preserved and strengthened for the benefit of the Holy Land, the Middle East and the entire world, and that wisdom and prudence prevail, to avoid adding new elements of tension in a world already shaken and scarred by many cruel conflicts.”

What is the Holy See’s position on Jerusalem and how has it developed over the past one hundred years?

Jerusalem is more than just a geographic location or a socio-political reality for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Jerusalem is a holy space where God’s revelation of God’s self unfolded over the generations. Sacred geography places Jerusalem at the very center of creation. From Jerusalem the message of God’s salvation goes out to all the earth. Ancient Israel’s direct progeny, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all look towards Jerusalem, lovingly venerating the Holy Places in the city’s precincts but also zealously watching that the faithful of other religions do not overstep the invisible boundaries set by tradition and history. Christians, Muslims and Jews have all had their turn ruling the city, however, Jerusalem’s vocation to be “city of peace” has yet to be realized.

The Catholic Church looks upon Jerusalem with love and concern. Pope John Paul II devoted his 1984 apostolic letter, *Redemptionis anno*, to Jerusalem and in it he expressed the depth of Christian attachment to and thought about the City. This letter sums up well contemporary Catholic thinking on Jerusalem: *“I think especially of the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus, offering his life, “has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... bringing the hostility to an end” (Eph 2:14.16).*

Before it was the city of Jesus the Redeemer, Jerusalem was the historic site of the biblical revelation of God, the meeting place, as it were, of heaven and earth, in which more than in any other place the word of God was brought to men.

Christians honor her with a religious and intent concern because there the words of Christ so often resounded, there the great events of the Redemption were accomplished: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. In the city of Jerusalem the first Christian community sprang up and remained throughout the centuries a continual ecclesial presence despite difficulties.

Jews ardently love her and, in every age, venerate her memory, abundant as she is in many remains and monuments from the time of David who chose her as the capital, and of Solomon who built the Temple there. Therefore, they turn their minds to her daily, one may say, and point to her as the sign of their nation.

Muslims also call Jerusalem “holy”, with a profound attachment that goes back to the origins of Islam and springs from the fact that they have there many special places of pilgrimage and for more than a thousand years have dwelt there, almost without interruption.

Besides these exceptional and outstanding testimonies, Jerusalem contains communities of believers full of life, whose presence the peoples of the whole world regard as a sign and a source of

hope – especially those who consider the Holy City to be in a certain way their spiritual heritage and a symbol of peace and harmony.

Indeed, insofar as she is the homeland of the hearts of all the spiritual descendants of Abraham who hold her very dear, and the place where, according to faith, the created things of earth encounter the infinite transcendence of God, Jerusalem stands out as a symbol of coming together, of union, and of universal peace for the human family” (Redemptionis anno, 20.4.1984).

The question of Jerusalem is also a political question and yet the Catholic Church does not see itself primarily as a political reality. The development of the Church’s policy with regard to an issue like Jerusalem is guided by two fundamental orientations formulated in the course of the 20th century. The first, formulated in the 1929 Lateran Treaty, which recognized the Vatican State as a political entity, is that the Holy See retains its neutrality on questions of political conflict. Article 24 of this Treaty defined the Holy See’s neutrality: *“In regard to the sovereignty appertaining to it also in the international realm, the Holy See declares that it desires to remain and will remain outside of any temporal rivalries between other States and the international congresses called to settle such matters, unless the contending parties make a mutual appeal to its mission of peace; it reserves to itself in any case the right to exercise its moral and spiritual power.”* During the Second Vatican Council, concluded in 1965, the Church, in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, gave the faithful guidelines regarding their political behavior: *“The Council wishes passionately to summon Christians to cooperate, under the help of Christ the author of peace, with all men in securing among themselves a peace based on justice and love and in setting up the instruments of peace” (n. 77).*

In the past century, the Catholic Church, and the Roman pontiffs who have guided her, have repeatedly expressed their concern for Jerusalem, attempting to safeguard Christian interests in the city and promote the city’s religious vocation. The modalities foreseen for achieving this aim have shifted over the past century as political realities have changed and the principle concerns of the Church have broadened in their scope. First and foremost, two basic concerns for Jerusalem have remained constant:

- the protection of the Christian Holy Places and free access to them for Christians,
- the well-being of Christian residents in Jerusalem.

In recent times, another two concerns have been clearly formulated and provide a context in which the Church’s position on Jerusalem is formulated:

- the promotion of justice and peace,
- the nurturing of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

Discussion here focuses directly on the question of Jerusalem however this question is connected to a wider array of issues including the Holy See’s relationship with the Christian communities in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East, the dialogue with the Jews and with Muslims, the promotion of justice and peace in Israel/Palestine and throughout the Middle East and the interpretation of Scripture.

Over the past century, three stages in the development of Catholic thinking with regard to Jerusalem can be discerned: the city as a “*corpus separatum*”, the city enjoying a “*special statute internationally guaranteed*” and finally, the city as defined within a negotiated settlement, the fruit of a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians with the involvement of all interested parties and the international community.

From 1917 to 1962

December 10, 2017 marks the 100th anniversary since the British conquest of Jerusalem within the context of the First World War. On November 2, 1917, just a few weeks before the British entered Jerusalem and the Ottoman Turks ceded defeat, the British government had published the Balfour Declaration, which promised “*the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people*”. Although Pope Benedict XV welcomed the return of Jerusalem and the Holy Places to Christian hands (discourse to Cardinals, 10.3.1919), he expressed concern that the arrival of large

numbers of Jews would endanger the Christian communities and even replace them (discourse to Cardinals, 13.6.1921). In his first address to the Cardinals, Benedict's successor, Pope Pius XI also expressed his concern, echoing that of his predecessor, that the rights of the Catholics in Jerusalem might be negatively affected by the change in the status of Jews, Muslims and non-Catholics (particularly Anglicans and Protestants) (discourse to Conclave, 11.12.1922).

The Holy See, although not invited to be party to the League of Nation's definition of the British mandate for Palestine, explicitly formulated its position and relied on the French administration to bring this position to the attention of decision makers. The Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, wrote to the Secretary General of the League of Nations that although the Holy See had no objection to the British receiving the mandate for Palestine, it had great reservations about the implied change in the status of Jews. Article 4 of the Mandate foresaw the involvement of an "appropriate Jewish agency" in "the establishment of the Jewish national home" and the evolution of the country. Gasparri, while stressing that "the Holy See does not oppose that the Jews have equal civil rights in Palestine", stressed that it could not accept that the Jews be granted a privileged position in comparison with others. The Cardinal drew attention to three unacceptable developments: the recognition of a Jewish governing body in Palestine parallel to the British administration (i.e. the Zionist Executive that became the Jewish Agency in 1929), its involvement in the development of the country and the promotion of Jewish immigration to Palestine (letter, 15.5.1922).

During the three decades after the First World War, the Church continued to insist on the protection of the Holy Places and the rights of the Christian communities. The most effective way to protect Jerusalem according to the Holy See, was to guarantee the city an international regime. In these years, the idea of a "corpus separatum", a separate body, became the basis for the Church's vision of Jerusalem as a city that was a safe home for Christians, accessible to all and outside the realm of territorial conflict. The Holy See not only made this vision clear through declarations but also began to lobby for this idea particularly in the League of Nations and later in the United Nations. Avoiding taking position on Zionist or Palestinian nationalism, the Church insisted that the Mandate not be used as a means for changing the character of the Holy City. In 1937, the British instituted Peel Commission called for the partition of Palestine and a "corpus separatum", which would include Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee subject to an international regime. The United Nations' partition plan in 1947 also proposed a "corpus separatum" for Jerusalem and Bethlehem, under the jurisdiction of the United Nations. In part III of Resolution 181 (1947), the UN proposed: "The City of Jerusalem shall be established as a corpus separatum under a special international regime and shall be administered by the United Nations. The Trusteeship Council shall be designated to discharge the responsibilities of the Administering Authority on behalf of the United Nations." The resolution proposed that after a ten-year period the situation should be reviewed. This resolution is definitive for international law and remains foundational for discussion of the status of Jerusalem.

As violence escalated in Palestine in the late 1940s, the Church incessantly called for "justice and peace to become a reality" (Pope Pius XII, discourse to the Supreme Arab Committee, 3.8.1946). Lamenting the war and destruction in Palestine, Pope Pius XII dedicated the month of May 1948 to special intercession for Palestine, praying that "concord and peace might triumph" (encyclical *Auspicia quaedam*, 1.5.1948) but to little avail. During and after the 1948 War, Pope Pius XII, clearly pained by the war and the human suffering it caused, also expressed outrage on hearing reports of the desecration of churches and other Catholic institutions. He clearly outlined the idea that Jerusalem be guaranteed a status that would put it outside of the ongoing conflict between the newly established State of Israel and its Arab neighbors. His encyclical, *In Multiplicibus*, published on October 24, 1948, was devoted entirely to the question of the war in the Holy Land. At the end of this encyclical, the Pope insisted that "it would be opportune to give Jerusalem and its outskirts, where are found so many and such precious memories of the life and death of the Savior, an international character which, in the present circumstances, seems to offer a better guarantee for

the protection of the sanctuaries. It would also be necessary to assure, with international guarantees, both free access to Holy Places scattered throughout Palestine, and the freedom of worship and the respect of customs and religious traditions."

A few months later, after the end of the first Arab-Israeli War, Pope Pius XII wrote that *"the time has come when Jerusalem and its vicinity, where the previous memorials of the Life and Death of the Divine Redeemer are preserved, should be accorded and legally guaranteed an "international" status, which in the present circumstances seems to offer the best and most satisfactory protection for these sacred monuments."* (encyclical *Redemptoris nostri*, 15.4.1949). He called on Catholics everywhere to use their influence *"to persuade the rulers of nations, and those whose duty it is to settle this important question, to accord to Jerusalem and its surroundings a juridical status whose stability under the present circumstances can only be adequately assured by a united effort of nations that love peace and respect the right of others."*

The Holy See did not establish diplomatic relations with Israel or with Jordan after the January 1949 armistice. However, the Apostolic Delegation in Jerusalem (established as the Holy See's representation in 1946) and the local Church authorities and religious communities kept the Holy See up to date with the facts on the ground, and Pope Pius XII continued to protest the desperate situation of the refugees, displaced by the war, as well as the profanation of various holy sites. The status of *"corpus separatum"* for Jerusalem was taken up by the United Nations in resolution 303 in December 1949 but Israel and Jordan refused the idea, both having annexed parts of divided Jerusalem into the areas under their full jurisdiction.

From 1962 to 1992

The convocation of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 by Pope John XXIII was to be a turning point in the history of the Church. With regard to the Church's position on Jerusalem, the promotion of ecumenical relations with Orthodox and Protestants, the budding dialogue with both Jews and Muslims and the call to dialogue with the modern world would impact how the Church formulated her position on Jerusalem.

At the end of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII's successor, Pope Paul VI, announced that he would visit the Holy Land. This was the first time that a Pope had left Italian territory since 1809 and the first time a Pope left Europe in centuries. This first voyage was conceived as a return to the roots of the Church. Without explicitly mentioning Israel or Jordan by name, Pope Paul explained that this pilgrimage, primarily motivated by piety, would also be to *"implore divine mercy in favor of peace among men"* (discourse, 4.12.1963). During this trip, he continued to avoid naming specific political realities, his discourse focusing on the history of salvation and the Christian relationship with the land and the Holy City. Standing at Damascus Gate, in the Jordanian part of the city, Pope Paul said with great emotion: *"To the habitants of Jerusalem we declare our great esteem for their religious spirit and for the noble traditions of courtesy and hospitality towards all pilgrims to the Holy Places"* (discourse, 4.1.1964). The most important encounter in Jerusalem was not with political authorities, with Jews or Muslims, Israelis or Arabs, but with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem, Athenagoras and Benedictos – an enduring symbol of the desire for Christian unity.

Three years later, on the outbreak of the 1967 War, Pope Paul sent a telegram to U Thant, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, expressing the hope that Jerusalem might be declared *"an open and inviolable city"* (telegram, 5.6.1967). Two days later, at the General Audience, as war raged, Pope Paul repeated this wish: *"it is a supreme interest for all the descendants of the spiritual seed of Abraham, Jews, Muslims and Christians, that Jerusalem be declared an open city, free from military operations, immune from causes of war, which have already caused such damage"* (general audience, 7.6.1967). He added that Jerusalem should be spared *"the regime of war"* and remain *"the Holy City, a refuge for the helpless and wounded, a symbol for all of hope and peace"*. A few days

later, the Pope sent an appeal to the regional heads of state, begging them to accede to the mediation of the United Nations in order to bring hostilities to an end.

The new situation, created after the war, was seen by the Holy See as yet another blow to attempts to leave the Holy City outside of conflict. In his address on the occasion of the creation of new cardinals in late June 1967, Pope Paul again stressed the vocation of Jerusalem, *“the Holy City of Jerusalem must always remain that which it represents: City of God, free oasis of peace and prayer, place of encounter, of elevation and agreement for all, with a proper status that is internationally guaranteed”* (discourse, 26.6.1967). A few weeks later, in a letter to Coptic Pope Cyril VI, Pope Paul assured his counterpart that the Holy See was doing everything possible to guarantee Jerusalem’s international status and protect the Holy Places (letter, 8.8.1967).

After the 1967 War and the conquest of East Jerusalem by the Israelis, a subtle change in the formulation of the position of the Holy See became perceptible. No longer insisting on *“corpus separatum”*, i.e. the internationalization of Jerusalem, the Holy See began to promote a special statute for the Holy Places and the religious communities, which would shield them from the ongoing conflict. At the end of 1967, in an address to the Sacred College, Pope Paul detailed the Holy See’s vision regarding the necessity for an international regime that would ensure *“the liberty of cult, respect, conservation and access to the Holy Places”*, taking into account the *“historical and religious physiognomy of Jerusalem”* (discourse, 22.12.1967). The special regime for the Holy Places was coupled with a concern for the welfare of the Christian communities that lived in the city. The Pope insisted on *“the free enjoyment of the legitimate civil and religious rights of persons, residences and activities of all communities”*. Pope Paul VI promoted the idea that Jerusalem must be protected by *“an international legal guardianship”* and that the rights of all must be respected (discourse to Sacred College, 20.6.1971, cf. discourse to Sacred College, 23.12.1971, apostolic exhortation *Nobis in animo*, 25.3.1974, discourse to President Sadat of Egypt, 13.2.1978).

Other subtle changes can be noted in Catholic discourse about Jerusalem after the Second Vatican Council. The Holy See was no longer uniquely concerned with Christian Holy Places and Christian communities, but also with questions of justice and peace and the dialogue with Jews and Muslims. For example, at the Angelus prayer in August 1969, Pope Paul *“vividly deplored”* the attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. *“The fact has struck this time the religious feelings of the Muslims, shaken by the ruinous event to a beloved site for the tenacious and jealous veneration of millions of men. We understand their bitterness but we hope that it does not aggravate the condition of the Middle East, already so tender and delicate”* (discourse, 31.8.1969). In a response to the Sacred College in 1973, the Pope stressed *“the duty, more than the right, which we are obliged to work on, because any resolution touching the state of Jerusalem and the Holy Land (...) responds to the needs of the particular character of that unique city in the world, and to the rights and legitimate aspirations of those who belong to the three great monotheistic religions who have, in the Holy Land, sanctuaries among the most precious and dear to their hearts”* (discourse, 21.12.1973). The pontificate of Pope Paul VI saw an increasing acceptance of the reality of the State of Israel (he received many of Israel’s political leadership even if the Vatican still had no diplomatic relations with Israel) and a recognition that the Palestinians were a people with the right to a homeland in Palestine (in the mid-1970s the Palestinians were no longer referred to as “refugees” but as a “people”).

In his first general audience, Pope John Paul II evoked the hope that a new era of peace had begun in the Holy Land as at that same time the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt were being worked out in the United States (discourse, 6.9.1978). Pope John Paul II promoted the new vision of relations with Jews and with Muslims, a fraternal dialogue that had implications for the position on Jerusalem. The Holy See continued to insist on a special status for Jerusalem and it was this message that Pope John Paul II brought to the United Nations in 1979: *“I also hope for a special statute that, under international guarantees—as my predecessor Paul VI indicated—would respect the particular nature of Jerusalem, a heritage sacred to the veneration of millions of believers of the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam”* (discourse, 2.10.1979).

In 1979, Archbishop Giovanni Cheli, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See at the United Nations made a detailed declaration on Jerusalem and therein stated; *“On this subject, the Holy See endeavors to keep in contact not only with the religious authorities of the various Christian Churches but also with the principal leaders of Islam and Judaism”* (declaration, 3.12.1979). He went on to say that *“whatever solution be found to the question of sovereignty over Jerusalem (not excluding the hypothesis of the “internationalization” of the City), the satisfying and safeguarding of requirements must be ensured and, at the same time, the international community ought to be the guarantor of interests that involve numerous and diverse peoples”*. In the declaration, the Holy See insisted upon a solution that would ensure justice attained by peaceful means. According to the Holy See, the *“special statute internationally guaranteed for Jerusalem”* had to include:

- parity of the religious communities, involving freedom of worship, access to the Holy Places, protection of rights and safeguarding the historical and urban aspects proper to the City,
- equal enjoyment of rights for all religious communities guaranteeing the promotion of spiritual, cultural, civil and social life including opportunities for economic progress, education, employment, etc.

In the light of this, it was not surprising that the Holy See, in harmony with most of the international community, firmly rejected the Israeli formal annexation of East Jerusalem in 1980.

Pope John Paul II’s 1984 apostolic letter, completely dedicated to the subject of Jerusalem, noted: *“The Roman pontiffs, especially in this century, have witnessed with an ever-anxious solicitude the violent events which have afflicted Jerusalem for many decades, and they have followed closely with watchful care the declarations of the United Nations which have dealt with the fate of the Holy City. On many occasions the Holy See has called for reflection and urged that an adequate solution be found to this difficult and complex situation. The Holy See has done this because she is concerned for peace among people no less than for spiritual, historical, and cultural reasons of a nature eminently religious”* (Redemptionis anno, 20.4.1984). The Pope repeated the demand that Jerusalem be spared the ongoing conflict in the region: *“Indeed, there should be found, with goodwill and farsightedness a concrete and just solution by which different interests and aspirations can be provided for in a harmonious and stable form, and be safeguarded in an adequate and efficacious manner by a special statute internationally guaranteed so that no party could jeopardize it.”* Underlining the demand that Israelis might live in security and that the Palestinians might be accorded a homeland in which they might live in peace, he wrote: *“I am convinced that the failure to find an adequate solution to the question of Jerusalem, and the resigned postponement of the problem, only compromises further the longed for peaceful and just settlement of the crisis of the whole Middle East.”* This letter, eminently sensitive to Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, insisted that Jerusalem be allowed to accomplish her spiritual vocation.

From 1992 to today

Further subtle change in the nature of the discussion was due to the initiation of direct negotiations between the Holy See and both Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization after 1992, undertaken in the light of the beginning of negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leadership. While maintaining that the Holy See’s basic position on Jerusalem had not changed, a new element had become apparent in the Holy See’s discourse: encouraging direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and accepting that these negotiations would ultimately decide the fate of Jerusalem, all the while insisting on international guarantees for the safety and wellbeing of both the Holy Places and the communities that worship there.

The signing of the *Fundamental Agreement between Holy See and State of Israel* in 1993 raised much controversy regarding possible imminent changes in the Holy See’s position on Jerusalem. In fact, the agreement made no mention of Jerusalem and, in the wake of the signing, the Holy See insisted that no change in position had been made. In a summary of the Holy See’s position on Jerusalem, published by the Secretariat of State in May 1996, it was stated that *“the Holy See has not changed its position”*. Although maintaining neutrality and refusing involvement in *“temporal*

conflicts", the Holy See underlined the "right to exercise its moral and spiritual teaching office". Thus, the declaration pointed out, the Holy See's position was the same as that of the international community. This position was summarized in the declaration as follows: "The part of the city militarily occupied in 1967 and subsequently annexed and declared the capital of the State of Israel is occupied territory, and all Israeli measures which exceed the power of a belligerent occupant under international law are therefore null and void." However, the declaration also acknowledged that the Holy See's interest in Jerusalem went beyond territorial issues and touched upon a religious dimension. The declaration explained how, in the interest of safeguarding Jerusalem's unique character, Holy See policy had first supported the "corpus separatum" idea and had then come to call for an "internationally guaranteed special statute". Quoting at length Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on Jerusalem, the declaration explained that the Holy See firmly held that "no unilateral claim made in the name of one or other of the religions or by reason of historical precedence or numerical preponderance is acceptable". Safeguarding the identity of Jerusalem means that the "historical and material characteristics of the city as well as its religious and cultural characteristics must be preserved". However, the declaration also made clear that this safeguarding should not only be understood as applying to the Holy Sites but needed to include the communities that live around the sites and their rights. Relating to the Oslo peace talks, the declaration quoted the Pope calling on the international community to offer "the political parties most directly involved, the juridical and diplomatic instruments capable of ensuring that Jerusalem, one and holy, may truly be a crossroads of peace" and the declaration explained that "His Holiness is asking for international assistance to safeguard the true value that Jerusalem has for Israelis and Palestinians, for Jews, Christians and Muslims".

In November 1997, the *Legal Personality Agreement: State of Israel-Holy See* was signed in order to facilitate the recognition of the Catholic Church's institutional life in the State of Israel. Although Jerusalem was not mentioned in the text of the agreement, controversy was stirred because the list of institutions attached to the document included those in East Jerusalem, territory occupied after the 1967 War. This touched directly on the definition of sovereignty in Jerusalem. On this issue, the Holy See continued to insist that it strictly abided by international law, making a distinction between the part of Jerusalem that was part of the State of Israel and that part of Jerusalem (including the Old City) that was occupied by Israel during the 1967 War. In the agreements with Israel, the Holy See had to accept that Israel administered the territories that had been occupied however it did not consider them an integral part of the State of Israel, reserving the Church's right to exercise its moral and spiritual teaching office with regard to these territories.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, Secretary for Relations with States at the Secretariat of State, in a conference in Jerusalem in 1998, explained how the Holy See saw the interrelationship between the political claims on the city and its universal religious vocation: "There is nothing to prevent Jerusalem, in its unity and uniqueness, becoming the symbol and the national capital of both the peoples that claim it as their capital. But, if Jerusalem is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, it is also sacred to many people from every part of the world who look to it as their spiritual capital" (discourse, 26.10.1998). The Cardinal insisted that "the whole international community is responsible for the uniqueness and sacredness of this incomparable city".

The signing of the *Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the PLO* in February 2000 refocused attention on Jerusalem. The text of the Agreement spoke of Jerusalem at length: "Declaring that an equitable solution for the issue of Jerusalem, based on international resolutions, is fundamental for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, and that unilateral decisions and actions altering the specific character and status of Jerusalem are morally and legally unacceptable; calling, therefore, for a special statute for Jerusalem, internationally guaranteed, which should safeguard the following:

- a. Freedom of religion and conscience for all.
- b. The equality before the law of the three monotheistic religions and their institutions and followers in the City.
- c. The proper identity and sacred character of the City and its universally significant, religious and

cultural heritage.

d. *The Holy Places, the freedom of access to them and of worship in them.*

e. *The Regime of "Status Quo" in those Holy Places where it applies."*

In October 2000, Archbishop Renato Martino, the Holy See's Permanent Observer at the United Nations, gave further explicit expression to the idea that Jerusalem's status should be the fruit of negotiations with international guarantees regarding the Holy Places and the religious communities: *"Because Jerusalem holds such spiritual importance to believers representing almost forty five percent of the world's population, as recommended by the General Assembly, in its resolution of 25 April 1997 and reaffirmed thereafter, 'a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of the City of Jerusalem, which should be reached in permanent status negotiations between the parties, should include internationally guaranteed provisions to ensure the freedom of religion and of conscience of its inhabitants as well as permanent, free and unhindered access to the Holy Places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities'"* (discourse, 55th session of General Assembly on UNWRA, 30.10.2000).

Diplomatic relations established with both Israel and Palestine paved the way for three more visits of a Pope to Jerusalem. During these visits, the pontiffs were able to draw particular attention to Jerusalem's fundamental identity and vocation. For example, Pope John Paul II, at an inter-religious gathering in Jerusalem in March 2000, said: *"For all of us Jerusalem, as its name indicates, is the "City of Peace". Perhaps no other place in the world communicates the sense of transcendence and divine election that we perceive in her stones and monuments, and in the witness of the three religions living side by side within her walls. Not everything has been or will be easy in this co-existence. But we must find in our respective religious traditions the wisdom and the superior motivation to ensure the triumph of mutual understanding and cordial respect"* (discourse, 23.3.2000).

Pope Benedict, who visited Jerusalem in May 2009, spoke repeatedly of Jerusalem and her vocation. Upon his arrival in Israel, he said: *"The hopes of countless men, women and children for a more secure and stable future depend on the outcome of negotiations for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In union with people of good will everywhere, I plead with all those responsible to explore every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties, so that both peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own, within secure and internationally recognized borders. In this regard, I hope and pray that a climate of greater trust can soon be created that will enable the parties to make real progress along the road to peace and stability"* (discourse, 11.5.2009). That same day, at the Israeli State President's residence, he spoke of Jerusalem: *"Jerusalem, which has long been a crossroads for peoples of many different origins, is a city which affords Jews, Christians and Muslims both the duty and the privilege to bear witness together to the peaceful coexistence long desired by worshippers of the one God; to lay bare the Almighty's plan for the unity of the human family announced to Abraham; and to proclaim the true nature of man as a seeker of God. Let us resolve to ensure that through the teaching and guidance of our respective communities we shall assist them to be true to who they are as believers, ever aware of the infinite goodness of God, the inviolable dignity of every human being, and the unity of the entire human family"* (discourse, 11.5.2009).

Pope Benedict's visit focused particularly on the identity and vocation of the local Christians and in the mass celebrated at the foot of the Mount of Olives for them, he said: *"Jerusalem, in fact, has always been a city whose streets echo with different languages, whose stones are trod by people of every race and tongue, whose walls are a symbol of God's provident care for the whole human family. As a microcosm of our globalized world, this City, if it is to live up to its universal vocation, must be a place which teaches universality, respect for others, dialogue and mutual understanding; a place where prejudice, ignorance and the fear which fuels them, are overcome by honesty, integrity and the pursuit of peace. There should be no place within these walls for narrowness, discrimination, violence and injustice. Believers in a God of mercy - whether they identify*

themselves as Jews, Christians or Muslims – must be the first to promote this culture of reconciliation and peace, however painstakingly slow the process may be, and however burdensome the weight of past memories” (discourse, 12.5.2009).

In May 2014, Pope Francis became the fourth pontiff to visit Jerusalem in modern times. During his visit to the Israeli State President’s residence, he said: *“I am happy to be able to meet you once again, this time in Jerusalem, the city which preserves the Holy Places dear to the three great religions which worship the God who called Abraham. The Holy Places are not monuments or museums for tourists, but places where communities of believers daily express their faith and culture, and carry out their works of charity. Precisely for this reason, their sacred character must be perpetually maintained and protection given not only to the legacy of the past but also to all those who visit these sites today and to those who will visit them in the future”* (discourse, 26.5.2014). Flying back to Rome, the Pope commented on the various proposals regarding a solution to the question of Jerusalem and formulated clearly that negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians must resolve the status of Jerusalem: *“The Catholic Church (...) has its own position from a religious perspective: it will be the city of peace of the three religions (...) The concrete measures for peace must emerge from negotiations (...) I believe that one has to enter into negotiations with honesty, a spirit of fraternity and mutual trust. And there everything is negotiated: all the territory, also the relations. Courage is needed to do this, and I fervently pray to the Lord that these two leaders, these two governments, will have the courage to go forward. This is the only path to peace. I only say what the Church must say and has always said: Jerusalem should be preserved as the capital of the three religions, as a point of reference, as a city of peace”* (interview, 26.5.2014).

The Holy See has already concluded a final agreement with the State of Palestine, signed on June 26, 2015. This agreement calls for an *“equitable solution for the issue of Jerusalem, based on international resolutions,”* stating that *“unilateral decisions and actions altering the specific character and status of Jerusalem are morally and legally unacceptable.”* It is expected that a final agreement will eventually be signed with the State of Israel, after 25 years of ongoing negotiations. These agreements bring the Holy See’s diplomatic relations with both Palestine and Israel to their fullest form, recognizing the Church as an active agent in both societies. Unfortunately, negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians have not yet brought about a lasting peace and Jerusalem remains an arena of ongoing conflict. The Holy See insists on its neutrality with regard to territorial claims, to the chagrin of the Palestinians, and on its strict abiding by the definitions of international law and UN resolutions, to the chagrin of the Israelis. It sees its role as preserving a dimension of Jerusalem, as holy city, where three religions converge and where Christianity has its origins, a dimension too often marginalized in the national conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Undoubtedly, the Holy See will continue to work tirelessly to promote its vision of Jerusalem as a city of peace and a place where Jews, Muslims and Christians can live together and bear witness to a God who loves all of those children, called to make Jerusalem a place where God’s name is venerated.

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Editorial remarks

* Fr David M. Neuhaus SJ served as Latin Patriarchal Vicar within the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem until his resignation in August 2017. He was responsible for Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel as well as the Catholic migrant populations.