

'Living stones' of Palestine dwell in shadow of death

By Father Edward Dillon
Guest contributor

Christians from all over the world love to make the pilgrimage to Bethlehem at Christmastime. For centuries this was an idyllic experience: singing Christmas carols in one of the shepherds' caves and visiting the ancient basilica of the Nativity.

When Jordan's King Hussein was able to extend his sovereignty over Bethlehem, he would send pipers and drummers in colorful costumes to play traditional Christmas songs on Christmas Day, an example of Muslim reverence for the Christmas story and for Jesus and Mary.

Since the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and their military occupation of Bethlehem, the idyll has been shattered.

Before 1967, the Palestinian town of Bethlehem was 90 percent Christian. Now it is more than 50 percent Muslim, and the new fortress-like Jewish settlements surrounding the town threaten the Christian remnant.

Christians, in fact, have been leaving occupied Palestine at a faster clip than their Muslim brothers and sisters. Old Jerusalem, for example, before 1967, had 50,000 Christians whose roots in that city often went back to a time before the advent of Islam in the Near East.

Today there are less than 10,000 Christians in Jerusalem. There is, in addition, a new breed of Christian taking up residence, largely from the United States and of fundamentalist outlook, oblivious of the ancient Christian communities. This new breed confines its attention to the ancient sites and historic monuments. They seem to miss completely the testimony of the living stones who could speak eloquently if given a chance.

When I think of the living stones I have met in the Holy Land and its environs, I think of Victor, who fled his native Bethlehem after the 1967 Israeli conquest, and now lives in Amman, Jordan. He is a deacon of the Latin Catholic parish there. One day he brought me to Mount Nebo, the mountain peak in Jordan from which Moses was able to glimpse the promised land. Like Moses, Victor was at least able to point out to me the town of his childhood to which he is not allowed to return.

I think of Ibrahim, another courageous Palestinian Catholic, who guided me through the militant Jewish settlements surrounding Jerusalem. He showed me the churches and shrines of Ain Kerem, the town where John the Baptist was born and where Mary went in haste to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Until 1948, it was a totally Catholic Palestinian village. When the villagers of a neighboring Muslim town (Deir Yassin) were massacred by Zionist radicals, a survivor fled to Ain Kerem to warn resi-

dents. The entire village fled. Nothing but monuments remains.

The crowning irony is that the government of Israel took a portion of the land of the village of Deir Yassin and built their famous museum of the Holocaust (Yad Vashem) on it.

The United States used its immense power in 1947 to pressure the fledgling United Nations to cede half of Palestine to the Zionists, largely as a refuge for Jews fleeing the ravages of Nazi terror. Most people unfamiliar with the area — Jews as well as western Christians — may have sincerely believed that Palestine was largely a land without a people waiting for the people without a land.

It's not easy for Americans to acknowledge that it was largely their influence that shaped the decision to penalize Arab peoples in general and the Palestinians in particular for what Europeans did to Jews.

Indeed the whole western world has been slow to admit that one dispossession does not justify another.

When the UN partitioned Palestine, the coastal half — which was half Jewish, half Arab — was ceded to the Zionists. The interior half was overwhelmingly Arab. In the ensuing 1948-49 war, the Zionists were able to conquer the half of Palestine that had been ceded to them by UN vote, and half of the remainder as well. Thus three-quarters of Palestine became the State of Israel. As many as 700,000 Palestinians fled. Well over 300 of their villages were destroyed without a trace.

Some have survived almost intact, such as the largely Christian town of Nazareth in the Galilee, a fertile section of Palestine conquered by the Zionists in 1948-49, though not ceded to them by the UN.

The Palestinians who have lived within the 1949 boundaries of the State of Israel have undergone an evolution quite distinct from their brothers and sisters who live in the territories occupied by the Israeli military since the 1967 war. The U.S. press usually refers to the former as "Israeli Arabs." The latter are called Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. These two groups have grown closer to one another since the Intifada (the uprising) began two years ago in December, 1987.

Since the Intifada, it is somewhat more difficult for the Christians of the West to overlook the plight of their fellow Christians of ancient tradition "who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death."

If there is a bright side to their struggle, it is this: The Christians of Palestine, so long divided fiercely among themselves, are discovering their common heritage. Another hopeful sign is a significant minority of Israeli human rights activists who are full partners with the Palestinians in their struggle for



Present-day Jerusalem occupies ground regarded as holy by Moslems, Christian remnant of King Solomon's temple, is the Dome of the Rock, a Moslem temple said to be the site where Isaac and the Prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven.

full autonomy in their homeland.

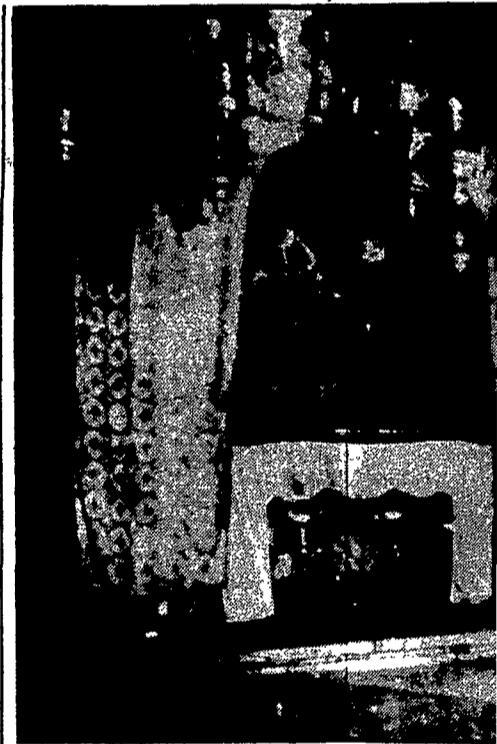
It seems clear, however, that none of the three main religions of the Book has adequately confronted the endemic intolerance of our traditions. This presents an ecumenical challenge that can not be deferred.

Father Ed Dillon, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Rochester, first visited the Middle East in 1965 as a student on an archaeological tour.

He has returned four times since 1983, when he was sent by Americans for Middle East Understanding — a New York-based group that works to improve relationships with and among groups in the Middle East — to investigate conditions under which prisoners were being held in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

During his most recent trip in March and April, 1989, Father Dillon led a human rights fact-finding group which visited people struggling for justice and peace in Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

For those interested in more information, Father Dillon suggests two video cassettes produced by the collaborative efforts of the Episcopal Diocese of California and the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. The first is entitled "The Forgotten Faithful." The second is entitled "Truth, Justice, and Peace." Both can be ordered from Americans for Middle East Understanding, Room 771, 475 Riverside Drive, NY, NY, 10115, 212/870-2053.



Built by order of Constantine I in the 4th century, the Dome of the Rock is said to stand above the cave where the Jewish King David was born. It was surrounded by Israeli military forces and surrounded by



Hasidic rabbis worship at Judaism's most sacred site, the Wailing Wall, so named for the mournful chants and prayers offered there since Byzantine times, when the temple was destroyed. By tradition, faithful Jews still offer prayers and penance at the wall daily.



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