

# WORLD & NATION

## Holy sites closed in protest of ruling to permit mosque

By Judith Sudilovsky  
Catholic News Service

JERUSALEM (CNS) — The heads of Christian churches in the Holy Land announced they would close all Christian holy sites to protest an Israeli government decision to allow a mosque next to a Catholic basilica in Nazareth.

"To express the disapprobation of all the churches at the way that their rights have been summarily violated ... all the sanctuaries of the Holy Land will be closed on Nov. 22-23," said the Nov. 4 statement signed, "with a heavy heart," by Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem; Franciscan Father Giovanni Battistelli of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land; and the Greek Orthodox and Armenian patriarchs.

The Custody of the Holy Land functions as a Middle East province of the Franciscans, with the specific mission of providing a Catholic presence and ministry at the holy sites and shrines.

"We trust that we do not need to take any further steps in the near future and that the government will rise to the challenge by applying law and order for all," the statement said.

The Christian officials described Israel's decision as "clear discrimination" against the Christian community and charged that the government had abandoned the rule of law by giving in to Muslim fundamentalists' demands in hopes of electoral gains. They said they viewed the decision with "grave concern."

"Despite the ruling of the court of law in Israel that the land adjacent to the Basilica

of the Annunciation is state land, the government has supported a small group of fundamentalists who are intent on building a mosque only a few (feet) away from the historical Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth," they said. In their statement they noted that Christians and Muslims have existed peacefully in Nazareth since the Ottoman period some 500 years ago.

"The common bonds that link Christianity and Islam in this city are firm and have made the City of the Annunciation an example of traditional harmony and peace," they said. "This sense of peaceful co-existence and confident harmony has recently been shaken by a series of sad events that have been painful and counterproductive for the majority of both faith communities."

Two years ago Muslim fundamentalists took over a plot of land in front of the basilica intended for an Italian-styled piazza as part of the city's preparations for the thousands of Christian pilgrims expected during the jubilee year. The fundamentalists claimed the land belonged to the Waqf, or Islamic Religious Trust. They erected a protest tent and declared their intention to build a mosque that would tower over the basilica.

In October, an Israeli court ruled that the land belonged to the Israeli government but, in an attempt to reach a compromise, the government decided to permit a much smaller mosque on part of the disputed land. The remaining land will be given to the Nazareth municipality, which was to build the piazza.

As promised, on Nov. 8 Muslims in Nazareth dismantled the makeshift



Reuters/CNS

Muslims pray Oct. 8 in a demonstration to protest the Vatican's opposition to a proposed mosque at the site in Nazareth. The Basilica of the Annunciation, the main Catholic shrine in Nazareth, is seen in the background.

mosque they had set up next to the basilica two years ago. Nevertheless, they vowed to keep praying at the site until the mosque was built.

A cornerstone-laying ceremony for the mosque is slated for Nov. 23. Construction on the site is not to begin until after March, which has been discussed as a time for a potential papal visit.

According to the agreement, Israel is to transfer some \$95,000 to the shopkeepers in the area whose shops would have to be torn down, and the Waqf is to receive another 2.5 acres of land from the government for the construction of other institutions.

The Christian leaders called on Muslims to support their decision to close the churches.

"We pray to the Almighty that the wounds of Nazareth will soon be healed,

and that it can re-discover its special role as a symbol of the traditional and centuries-long peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims and as a stimulus for the peace which the Holy Land needs so much," the statement said.

An Israeli official expressed regret over the churches' decision and said Israel was committed to freedom of religion for all.

In a Nov. 5 interview with Vatican Radio, Patriarch Sabbah said it was unclear whether the government's decision to allow the mosque would compromise a possible papal visit to Nazareth.

"The pope's visit depends on what concrete situation there will be in Nazareth. If the population will really be in division, if there will be disturbances — we don't know yet, nor can we predict. The story is not yet concluded, the last word has not yet been said," he said.

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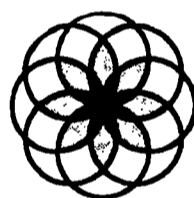
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