



April 18, 2016

The Honourable Stéphane Dion, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister,

Greetings on behalf of the Catholic Bishops in Canada. I would like to bring forward to your attention two proposed recommendations which are of great importance to the Bishops of Canada: 1) to encourage the Government of Israel to recognize claims by a small Palestinian Christian community in the Cremisan Valley, and 2) to classify as “genocide” the atrocities carried out by the so-called “Islamic State”. Although these two matters are not related to each other, we consider both to be issues of justice and peace, and which have significant impact not only for Christians but for all people in the Middle East.

As background, I should mention that in addition to many instances over the past 50 years of national and local involvement by our country’s Catholic dioceses and eparchies in interfaith conversations and collaboration, for the past 16 years either the President of our Conference, or another member of our Executive Committee, has participated in annual week-long meetings in Israel and Palestine. Known as the *Coordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church in the Holy Land*, it began at the prompting of the Holy See and includes delegates from a number of the Episcopal Conferences of Europe as well as those of the United States and South Africa. This past January, following its customary approach of engaging in conversations with local Christians, Jews and Muslims, the Coordination’s meeting focused on visits to Gaza, the Cremisan Valley and Jordan.

Our Conference’s delegate for the Coordination’s 2016 visit was the Most Reverend Lionel Gendron, P.S.S., Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil. This was his second experience as delegate. Although he heard and witnessed the fears of many in the Holy Land dealing with violence and imminent war, Bishop Gendron likewise noted small but significant signs of hope. These included grassroots efforts among Muslims and Christians, in addition to examples of inspiring collaborative efforts among Jews and Muslims with the encouragement and assistance of local Christians. Bishop Gendron, and the Bishops from the other countries as well, were struck by the quiet and courageous determination among the ordinary people of Gaza to rebuild their homes, despite the scarcity of construction materials and the heavy impediments of security. At the

same time, we also acknowledge the legitimate security concerns that the State of Israel and Egypt face regarding extremist elements in Gaza. Our Conference shares with other Catholic Bishops around the world a deep concern for all the peoples of the Holy Land to live free from fear, violence and hatred.

1. Encouraging Israeli authorities to recognize claims concerning the Cremisan Valley

The first matter of concern which our Conference urges the Government of Canada to consider is that you encourage Israeli authorities to recognize and remedy the difficult situation being experienced by the Christian community in the Cremisan Valley. This is a mainly agricultural area in the West Bank on the Palestinian side of the Green Line, adjacent to the towns of Beit Jala and Bethlehem. The Ministry of Defence seems determined to construct a security wall that will cut off 58 Palestinian Christian families from their agricultural lands which are among the most fertile in the Holy Land. Not only will the families lose their land and livelihood, but the local Catholic Salesian monastery there, as well as the nearby convent of Salesian Sisters, will be severely restricted in their educational services to 450 disadvantaged children – girls and boys, Muslims and Christians – from the surrounding towns and villages.

In August 2015, the Israeli army began building the security wall in the area, specifically on the privately owned lands of Beir Onah - Beit Jala, uprooting olive trees and bulldozing agricultural lands as sections of the wall are completed. Construction work on the wall in the Cremisan intensified at the beginning of April 2016 with eight-meter high sections of concrete now being put in place. This past September 2, the St. Yves Society issued a comprehensive outline of the legal case, entitled *The Last Nail in the Coffin: The Annexation Wall in Cremisan*. The text has been posted on the website of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, <http://en.lpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20150902063619.pdf>. As noted on page 18 of the outline, the Cremisan Valley has not been the site of militant action in the recent past.

This past February, the Israeli High Court, while dismissing the latest petitions in the case, recognized that the landowners have the right to object to any route of the wall that does not maintain their right to access their lands freely, while the Salesian Sisters have the right to object to the final route of the security wall in the future. We join our voice to those of the other Conferences of Bishops which participate in the Holy Land Coordination, urging our respective governments to encourage all parties involved to exercise a more humanitarian approach to the Cremisan situation, and to seek alternative approaches through dialogue and negotiation.

At the same time as advocating for a just solution to the situation in the Cremisan Valley, we also wish to underscore our deep concern and total rejection of the use of violence and terror in the Holy Land. According to recent media reports, the Israeli Foreign Ministry indicates 34 Israelis have been killed in terrorist attacks and 404 people injured, including four Palestinians, in the wave of violence that began last autumn. This includes 331 stabbings and other attacks or attempted attacks. According to the international NGO Defence for Children

International, some 180 Palestinians were killed and more than 15,000 injured from September through February, with some of the injured and killed including the attackers

As underscored by the Holy See in its 2015 document on Catholic - Jewish relations, *“The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”*, Judaism is not simply another religion with which the Catholic Church is in dialogue. Jews are our “elder brothers”, our “fathers in faith”. Because of these strong bonds, the Catholic Church feels a particular obligation to stand together with the Jewish community to decry any and all forms of anti-Semitism, wherever it may be found. At the same time, this close bond of friendship provides a bridge, a trusted relationship, whereby Catholics and Jews can speak in truth and love with one another, including matters which are of great mutual concern, including those such as the situation of Christian communities in the State of Israel and in Palestine, as well as the troubling signs of anti-Semitism in our day.

2. Classifying as “genocide” atrocities carried out by the so-called “Islamic State”

Our second recommendation follows up the joint letter which the Co-Chair of the Canadian Rabbinic Caucus, Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl, and I forwarded you on December 15, 2015, requesting that Canada make a priority of advocating for at-risk Christian communities in the Middle East as well as Africa. The international organization Aid to the Church in Need wrote to the Prime Minister of Canada and yourself this past February 3 on the dire situation of Christians in both Iraq and Syria. While it is evident that all religious minorities, including Shi’ite Muslims and Yezidis, risk persecution and oppression by the so-called “Islamic State” and thus fully deserve every effort toward protection and assistance, I wish to note, as Rabbi Frydman-Kohl and I pointed out in the said letter, that Christians, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East, are facing more persecution, restrictions, hostility and harassment than any other religious group. These statistics are confirmed by the 2014 findings of the Pew Research Center in the United States, as well as by an extensive report in Great Britain last year by Aid to the Church in Need.

Similar concerns about the religious minorities in the Middle East have been further articulated in the Marrakesh Declaration, developed at a Middle East conference this past January 25-27 which brought together Muslim leaders from more than 120 countries plus representatives of the region’s persecuted religious communities. The Declaration recognizes that “conditions in various parts of the Muslim world have deteriorated dangerously due to the use of violence and armed struggle as a tool for settling conflicts and imposing one’s point of view”; that criminal groups “alarmingly distort” Islam’s “fundamental principles and goals”; and that it “is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries.”

For these urgent reasons, our Conference urges you to make your own the recent assertion by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that “Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims.” Secretary Kerry’s March 17 statement comes immediately after a March 14 bipartisan vote in the House of Representatives, unanimously supporting a resolution condemning as genocide the atrocities by the so-called “Islamic State”. These actions by the United States follow the February 4

decision of the European Parliament to classify atrocities and religious cleansing by the “Islamic State” as genocide. Previously, during July 2015, Pope Francis also described the situation as genocide: “... we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus. This too needs to be denounced: in this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide – I insist on the word – is taking place, and it must end” (address given at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, July 9, 2015). By following with a similar intervention of your own, you would also help give support to the Marrakesh Declaration.

We welcome, Minister, your response to these suggestions and reflections. Should it be of assistance, Bishop Gendron and other representatives of our Conference would be most happy to meet with you to discuss these considerations further, as well as to work with you and the Government of Canada to promote efforts toward peace, justice and security in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East. Please be assured that our prayers and best wishes are with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Douglas Crosby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

(Most Rev.) Douglas Crosby, OMI
Bishop of Hamilton
President of the Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops