

Address by Archbishop Elias Chacour
E. H. Johnson Award Luncheon, June 9, 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great honour to be with you at this Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is a great honour, but it is also a very special burden to have to speak about the most complex situation and the most complicated conflict that continues raging in the Middle East; a situation that is having a direct or indirect impact on all of the world. I mean the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Every time I have to deal with this conflict, I feel like I am taking a knife and digging it into a fresh wound; it hurts a lot. What I have to say might be controversial, but it is the reality I live.

How can I start? I have only 30 minutes. I traveled almost 20,000 miles to speak 30 minutes with you! I think it is worth it if at the end of my speech I achieve my purpose. The best way for me to introduce this conflict is to introduce myself. Then you can see the complexities and the contradictions, and the hidden hope behind them.

Who is Archbishop Chacour? I am a walking contradiction. My affiliations look to be at war with each other. I am your forgotten, ignored brother. I am a *Palestinian*. A proud Palestinian.

I am a Palestinian *Arab*. My mother language is the Arabic language. I have learned eleven languages and I am sorry I have not learned more. A language is always a tool, an instrument of communication. Because we need to communicate with you, we have tried to learn the English language, as good or as bad as we can!

I am also a *Christian* Palestinian Arab. Yes, a Palestinian who is a Christian. How can this be? The media introduces Palestinians as Muslims, and Muslims as creatures who are bloodthirsty and inclined to violence. And yet I say, "I am the Archbishop of Galilee; I am a Christian." But I was not born Christian. I was converted to Christianity. I was born a baby, created in the image and the likeness of God. No more, but no less either. I have to argue to convince people that I was not born less than in the image of God.

I like to say that *not long ago* I was converted to Christianity, for we Palestinian Christian peasants do not have your conception of time. For us, time is measured differently. We still have the feeling that one thousand years are like one day before the Lord. So what are two thousand years? It seems to us like the day before yesterday that *he* was hanging around in our villages, in our towns, on our streets, with our boys and girls, watching our weddings, our funerals, our joys, our sad events, watching our shepherds, our fruit trees. And he made from these experiences the parables of the kingdom of heaven. Do you know his name? He is my compatriot. I'm the only archbishop in the world who can say truly that among my parishioners I have someone called Jesus Christ, another one called Mary, and also the twelve fisherman. They are parishioners under my jurisdiction. It is a great honour, but it is extremely difficult to deal with them!

It has been 2000 years since my ancestors gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem and "out of fear for the Jews the doors were locked" (John 20:19). Nobody could enter. At that moment, something happened. Their Lord, the man from Galilee, my compatriot from Nazareth, fulfilled his promises and sent to them his wind (*ruach* in Hebrew). He sent a *strong* wind. And when the wind is strong, it is a storm. He *stormed* my ancestors, cleansed their minds, and made them understand that there is a new invitation to the divine banquet with the Lamb of God. Who is invited? It is no more the Jews. Nor the Christians. Nor the Muslims. It is only and exclusively man and woman – *every* man and *every* woman are invited to the divine banquet!

My dear friends, the Palestinian Christian was born in the Upper Room. Yet, for two thousand years we Palestinian Christians have not been able to become outstanding philosophers or theologians. But that has not been our focus. We have been busy, obsessed with a story of a man from our own villages, from Nazareth. We have been overburdened with this worry to tell this story. We are storytellers with an exciting story that we think should be constantly on CNN as breaking news. We have continued retelling that story to generation after generation for 2000 years.

It is in this way that I was born as a Christian. I hope that we continue to be able to witness for the risen Lord and for the empty tomb. I hope I am wrong when I say that Christians are systematically disappearing from the Holy Land. When I think of Bethlehem 25 years ago, I remember Christians were 60% of the population. I look at Bethlehem today and see only nine to ten percent. I say, "Where are we going? What is happening? What can we do to decrease this ongoing emigration abroad? Why don't Christians want to stay in their ancestral land, telling the story of that man from Galilee?" There must be many, many reasons, but mainly it is due to the fact that Christians in Palestine have been reduced to second class citizens, to people who have to struggle for their rights and to beg rights as favours.

So I am Palestinian, Arab, and Christian. I am also a citizen of the state of Israel. That is a further complication. What is a Palestinian doing in Israel? Why doesn't he go home? That is a very serious question. I wish I could go home to my village, Kafr Bir'im, in Upper Galilee.

The first image I had of Jews was given to me by my father in 1948. He said to us, "Children, we might see Jewish soldiers for the first time in our history coming to our village. We need to welcome them as our brothers because they escaped a certain satanic plan orchestrated by a man who is evil in Germany, who wanted to annihilate all the Jews. Thank God, some escaped. They are coming to our village in a few days. We need to show them that in this place they are welcome." We said, "Why, father?" "Because they are our blood brothers. We and they pride ourselves to be the children of an Iraqi citizen called Abraham." And father prepared a unique banquet for the eventual arrival of these soldiers.

They came. They did not kill anybody. They did not hurt anybody. We gave them the inside of our homes, and we slept on the roofs. In Galilee in summer, you can sleep outside with millions of stars overhead. The whole night we camped...and the next. This lasted ten days, after which the officer of the army ordered all heads of families to come to Gaza. He gave them a written promise – we have it still – that after two weeks they would come back. "Take your wife and children. Lock your homes. Give me the keys and go for two weeks. When you come back your home will be intact." And we obeyed. We went just half a kilometer from our homes. It was exciting at first for us children. But two weeks is long. It became unbearable. After two weeks the heads of families, my father included, went back to see the army and said, "We want to return home."

They went, but they never ever came back. They were loaded onto military trucks like cattle, and driven from northern Galilee to the vicinity of the city of Nablus in the West Bank. They were told to cross the border, "You go away. Never come back. You will be killed if you come back. This country is no more your country."

It was worse than killing a person. It was like killing a person every day, every moment of their life. These men left and crossed the Jordan River. (The Jordan River is one of the rare rivers in the world about which there has been much more ink spilled to describe it than there is water in it.) They marched to Amman in Jordan, to Damascus in Syria, to Beirut in Lebanon. Many of these men were stuck in these

Arab countries, becoming the famous *Palestinian refugees*, the ones that President George W. Bush called “the Palestinian refugee problems.” *Problems*, not human beings. Well, Mr. President, who gave you the authority to reduce us to problems when we are human beings like you, but different from you?

Some men like my father were able to infiltrate back through the northern borders with Lebanon and that's how we heard what had happened. By then we had found a room in the neighbouring village; we took that room until we'd be able to come back. We did not know that we were condemned to be refugees – the victims of the victims of the World War II. We are still refugees, deportees in our own country.

My father never encouraged us to use violence to gain back our rights. He never allowed us to use any hate language against our Jewish blood brothers. The only thing he wanted was that we remember our right to return home since our family history in that home goes back to the middle of the 16th century. He always commended us to do everything possible to return and rebuild the home that the Israeli army destroyed three years later in 1951.

It was in this ambience that I was brought up a Christian by a simple peasant and his wife, my father and mother. My father always wanted one of his four sons to be a priest. When my older brothers refused, as the last and youngest one, I was delivered to the bishop. Little by little I developed this feeling of becoming a priest, to dedicate my life to serve my people, and to restore their broken dignity and self-esteem. Now I have been a priest for 43 years. And if I had to decide again? I would not hesitate to choose to be a priest again, to choose much suffering, much deprivation, but much more joy and consolation and happiness along with the feelings of giving, of being useful, and of receiving much more from others, from one's people.

I was ordained a priest in 1965 in Nazareth. My bishop called me one week later and said, “Elias, now you need to have a parish. I send you to Ibillin.” In fact, I did not know anything of Ibillin. He said, “Go for one month, and after a month we will decide your final assignment.” I thought, “What's one month, thirty days? That goes by fast.” I did not know then what I know now, that bishops and many archbishops forget so easily. My bishop forgot me in that village. And I forgot myself. I stayed, waiting for the month to end, for 38 years!

As I studied the situation in Ibillin, I discovered that with the creation of Israel my people were systematically ethnically cleansed; we started our diaspora, our flight, our catastrophe. We became dispersed into three major groups: the refugees in the surrounding Arab countries (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt); the refugees who left but remained in the small territory of Palestine not yet under Israeli control (later the West Bank, comprised of East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho, Nablus, and so on); and the refugees on a small strip of sand on part of the Sinai desert on the western side of Israel known today as the Gaza Strip. (Gaza City which once had 8,500 inhabitants now has 1,500,000 refugees!)

These refugees have been deprived of all kinds of human rights. They were left with just one right – the right to make children. And they made many healthy, ambitious children, who have no future. The only thing they could do was be born, grow up, marry, make children and die – what a meaningless life!

Seventeen years later with the Six Day War, Israel occupied all the rest of Palestine, and it added daily military humiliation to the degradation of the people of Gaza. I will spare you a description. But those

horrors of daily humiliations later on brought about terrorism which, along with George W. Bush's war against terrorism, created so many despairing people that had no choice but to give up all.

The first group, the poorest among the Palestinians, managed to stay inside the territory of Palestine which became the state of Israel – people like me. There are now 1,200,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel. Not citizens like my Jewish brothers and sisters. We are second-class citizens. I am against that and the death game of reducing each other to zeros.

Presently in Israel we are a very young community. Seventy-five percent of Palestinians are below 28 years old. Fifty percent are below 14 years old. I decided to give my life as a young priest to the fifty percent, to the younger generation. What was I to do? We were very limited. We were under a military regime. We were not allowed to leave the village without a written permit from the military governor, and that was given for the collaborators with the military, and only for half a day, one day, or two days. Not more than that. So I decided to do the easiest thing possible, to collect unused books from the families, restore these books and start the first Arabic public library. And we urged our children to read – they had lots of time for that!

This small public library project became the largest Arabic public library in Israel and is part of the Mar Elias Educational Institutions. Started in 1982 it grew out of my deep feeling of urgency to create a place where Palestinian Arab Christian, Muslim and Jewish youth and children can sit together. I became absolutely convinced that peace for Israel, peace for Palestine, and justice for both starts with children sitting around school desks, solving the same problems, knowing the same knowledge, and dreaming the same dreams. Then we can expect them to write the common history of their future.

The second thing I decided to do was to organize children's summer camps. For the first summer camp I decided to accept a maximum of 500 children. On the first day of camp 1,127 children came. What was I to do? First come, first serve is a good solution, isn't it? But I am from a very poor family that lost its home and its land; I never came first; I never even came last. I was always *after* the last arrival. I could not select *some* children. I canceled expensive activities and we had 1,127 children for three weeks.

For the third and last summer camp we organized, we registered over 5,000 children who came from thirty different villages for this "becoming very famous" summer camp. And you know – because you are a church group – when you are 5,000 you are entitled to a miraculous multiplication of bread! I needed that so badly, not just once but three times a day and for three weeks. I needed a miracle. Believing in the inspiration of prayer, I spent the whole day praying, "What can I do to feed 5,000 children for three weeks and three times a day?" And that evening I decided to hold thirty meetings – one meeting in each of the villages for the mothers of these children. And I asked each meeting of mothers to send us ten mothers a day. So there was young Abuna Chacour with three hundred of the most beautiful mothers preparing sandwiches and drinks for 5,000 children of God!

They did it. You might say, "What a beautiful Christian community!" Right? Let me whisper in your ears that a majority of these mothers were not Christians, they were Muslims. May I remind you humbly that we Christians have no monopoly on doing good, that we do not have an exclusive control over the Holy Spirit, that others can do good – and as good if not better than we do.

In 1981 I was still in Ibillin. We badly needed to find a way to educate our children. We needed a high school. Who could build the high school? I became convinced that if I did not do it, nobody would. So I applied for a building permit from the authorities.

Two weeks later the answer came: “Denied.” Oh goodness! How could I do it? They forbade me to build a school. But I asked myself, “Do you need to have a building permit, or do you need a building?” I decided I needed a building. We started the construction without a building permit. Three months later the police came asking, “Where is your building permit?” I had none. “Well, how can you build without a building permit, Mr. Chacour?” I explained I had never dealt with building permits, only with sand, cement, and tools.

The policeman was angry, but I was angrier! He said, “You don't do like that in a civilized country” and I replied that I wished he were civilized, that I was building a school without a building permit to help him to become more civilized! That was too much for the police. He said, “We stop here. We stop the building, and you are summoned to court.”

I went to court, but we did not stop building. By the way, before becoming elected Archbishop, I was in court 37 times, always for building permits! Nine months after we started construction, we opened the first building for 82 students (children 13 and 14 years old) with four teachers. After twenty-five years, this school has become the largest Christian school in all Israel with 4,500 students and 292 faculty members. It is a very Christian school, convinced and committed to Christ. And because it is Christian, we cannot tolerate to be alone, to be encapsulated with our own selves. We are open to our Muslim brothers and sisters, to our Druze brothers and sisters, and also to our Jewish brothers and sisters – because they were born, like me, babies in the image and likeness of God. Now 60% of our students are Muslim, 32% are Christians, and we have 82 Jewish students.

In 1986 when we already had 760 students in a school with a capacity for 350, I decided to build a gymnasium with some workshops and some classes. We prepared perfect drawings and the officials said “You will have your permit. But you know, Father Chacour, our bureaucracy is so slow.” So I left them busy with bureaucracy and I got busy with construction. One year later they came, ordered us to stop building, and I was summoned to court again. We stopped building, but we started digging underground rooms in the rock. There was no order to convince me that we had to stop providing education for young men and women. We dug three big rooms underground. But I did go knocking on every door, asking for help to get a building permit. Nobody refused, but nobody moved a finger to help us. Six long years passed before I decided to take a big step to get a building permit.

I decided that the shortest way to Jerusalem passes through a city called Washington, D.C. I flew to the National Airport in the centre of Washington. I took a car and drove to Vauxhall Road, to the residence of the then Secretary of State, James Baker. I thought, “I will pop into that residence. All they can do is kick me out. I have been kicked out by everybody but not by God who will never kick me out.” I parked and knocked on the door. The Secretary of State was not there. Amazingly enough his wife, Susan Baker, opened the door. She was expecting one more American lady. And here is a Middle Eastern man, strange looking, with a large beard!

Shocked, she said “Who are you?” And I said, “Madam, I am another man from Galilee.” She looked at me and said, “Do you have an appointment with us?” I said, “Madam, we men from Galilee, we never make appointments. We make appearances!”

Later on, she told me how confused she was. She surely did not want to let me in, but she could not for some reason kick me out. She invited me in – not into the living room where there was much noise, but into the kitchen. And she gave me something to drink. I drank it and then she said, “I'm sorry, but I have

to bid you farewell because I am busy with twenty American ladies.” As I was going out the door, she said, “We are having a Bible study hour.” I asked what they were studying. “We are having a look at the Sermon on the Mount.” And I wished them good luck. “Why is that?” she asked. I replied, “How can you understand it? It was not written by an American but by a peasant living next door to my village. And he did not write it in your American language. He wrote it in my Semitic language. What can you understand? Good luck.”

And Susan Baker, bless her heart, said, “I see. Can you help us understand it better?” I agreed to try. And this time I was taken into the living room. It took me two hours to explain what the first eight verses of the Sermon on the Mount mean to me. In America you sometimes call them “The Blessings,” other times “The Beatitudes.” And when some people want to be extravagant, they call them the “Be-happy Attitudes.” What heresy!

After two hours I said to these ladies, “Go and convince your husbands to get your hands dirty for justice and for integrity, if they really want to have peace and security in Israel and in Palestine.” And I went back home. I had stayed 24 hours.

One week later the telephone rang and it was Susan Baker. “Mr. Chacour, can we pray together?” And I said, “Why not?” We prayed together. It was the first time I had prayed to God on the telephone. In America you can do that. We were used to speaking to God without telephones, directly. But that's OK. And this operation repeated itself several times.

Perhaps you are wondering why I need to share with you all these details? First, it is because I believe in you. Secondly, and this is the major reason, it is because I am known to be an international beggar. If I came to Canada for three days to this General Assembly, it is not to sightsee. It is because I need *to beg*. I need *to ask favours* from you. I *need* these favours. Otherwise the ongoing slaughter of Palestinians and Jews will be our daily breaking news. I am an international beggar but I never beg for money. We need money very badly to build schools, to give scholarships for young boys and girls, to buy computers, to buy chairs and tables. It is important to have money, but I will never beg for money.

I am begging for friendship, for solidarity, for a change of attitude. If you have Jewish friends, even fanatical Jewish friends, Jewish friends who cannot tolerate the name of Palestinians (perhaps because we remind them that we are their victims just as they were victims somewhere else), then for God's sake I beg you to continue to give friendship to these Jewish friends. They need your friendship now more than ever before. Take this time, give them your money, give them your support and everything you want. That does not aggrieve me. It is good to be the friend of the Jews. But is it good that you express your friendship in a one-sided way? Is it good that you are for the Jews but against the Palestinians?

I stand here in the presence of this Assembly and tell you that I am your Palestinian brother. I have no bombs. I love the Jews, but I hate what the Jews do to us Palestinians. If you decide to take the Palestinian side – meaning that you would show understanding for everything we do, good as well as bad, compassion as well as violence – if that is what your friendship means, then I say we do not need your friendship. Because in becoming one-sided, becoming a friend for *either* side alone, what have you done to yourself? You reveal yourself to be one more enemy rather than a friend in this cruel battle.

Please we need no more enemies. We need one more common friend. We do not need to build more walls; we need to build more bridges over the walls so peace becomes a reality. If you can be as

generous as to be our friends without being the enemies of the Jews, then come forth. We need you. We need your friendship. If not, then back up. Stay in peace at home rather than to reduce us both into pieces. We, Jews and Palestinians, do not need to *learn* how to live together; we need just to *remember* how we used to live together 60 years ago.

We all need to have an attitude of welcoming and of acceptance. I need you to be a part of this in order to complete myself and to get to know myself as a Christian, Palestinian citizen of Israel. Together we need to encourage unity within the diversity. We are long past the time of asking, "Who started the violence, the Jews or the Palestinians? Who is right and who is wrong?" The only ones who are right, among the Jews and the Palestinians, are on the side that has the generosity to say "we are *also* right." The ones who are wrong are the ones who say, "The land belongs to us." They do not realize that the land belongs to neither Jews nor Palestinians. Both must learn how to belong to the land and to share their lives to be signs of hope for humanity.

Help us in that respect. The Presbyterian Church that I know has always been among the first to take initiatives for mutual understanding and for friendship. I am proud and thankful that you invited me. Thank you for listening to me speak at such length. Thank you.