

Sightings 5/4/06

Palestinian Christians in Their Own Words

-- Saliba Sarsar

It has often been said that "an enemy is one whose story we have not heard." I prefer the flipside of that notion: "A friend is one whose story we have heard." Among many voices that most of us have not yet heard are those of Palestinian Christians. Bringing attention to them here is one step toward befriending those whose stories have gone largely unheard in America.

Martin Marty's column on Palestinian Christians in the January 16 issue of *Sightings* is an instance of friendship, serving as a call to recognize that what many call the Holy Land is home to deeply anchored Palestinian Christians -- in addition to Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims, and others -- and that Palestinian Christians, though too often overlooked, do matter historically, religiously, and politically.

Palestinian Christians -- be they Anglican, Episcopalian, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Latin, or Lutheran -- pride themselves on their connections to faith and the land. As Afif Safieh, Palestinian Representative to the United States, emphasizes, "Christ and Christianity were born in Palestine." Today, many Palestinian Christians are discovering reflections of themselves in Jesus the crucified. And in addition to a sign of the forgiveness of sins, resurrection is interpreted as empowerment, turning a piece of dead wood into the "tree of life." Similarly, land and space are carefully protected not only as property, but also for their symbolic meaning, linking the past to the present and future.

Palestinian Christians also take pride in their Arab heritage. Father Rafiq Khoury of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem echoes the sentiments of many others, claiming that "Arabness is the space of my faith, the depth of my mission, and the document of my accreditation." However, the Palestinian Christian community is not monolithic; some Palestinian Christians individually embody numerous social, religious, and ethnic identities. Reverend Naim Stifan Ateek and Bishop Riah Abu El-Asal, for example, describe themselves as Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, Christian, and Anglican.

But while diverse, Palestinian Christians tend to express unity with regard to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For Quaker and peace activist Jean Zaru, "God is a God of justice and compassion, not of war, vengeance, and exclusivity." Reverend Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran, balances "the love of enemies with resistance to injustice, if the enemies attempt to shed our neighbor's blood." Roman Catholic Patriarch Michel Sabbah holds that peace in the Holy Land is possible when security for Israel and independence for the Palestinians are achieved.

Currently, Palestinian Christians are caught between their visions of peace and the reality imposed on them by tough conditions -- military, national, political, and socioeconomic. Numbering approximately 2 percent of the entire population in Israel/Palestine, and given their continuous emigration and the increasing numbers of Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews, their greatest challenge today is simply to survive.

While their status as a minority might make it easy to ignore or to underestimate the importance

of their presence, their complex identities as Christians and as Palestinians, as well as their religious and secular interests, make them crucial partners for building relationships across various borders and for moving the peace-making processes forward. As Evangelical Lutheran Church Bishop Munib Younan has put it, "God is calling us to hear His voice and to serve as catalysts of reconciliation in our highly volatile region."

I believe it behooves us to listen and respond to the voices of Palestinian Christians, as we would to others, in order to help them to survive and be healers in their own communities. Our responsibility is to enable them to be recognized, in the words of Bernard Sabella -- Head of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees, part of the Middle East Council of Churches, and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council -- "as a model to keep preaching for mutual respect and understanding," for serving "without prejudice or discrimination."

Receiving and responding to this voice and those of other Palestinian Christians widens the circle of those we may call friends.

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