



Alternative Tourism Group



## **An open letter in response to the statement of Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, International Custodian of the Holy Land/Head of all Franciscans**

### **Holy Land pilgrimages are a call to seek justice**

We have seen with dismay and deep concern the statement of Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, International Custodian of the Holy Land/Head of all Franciscans in which he states that "a pilgrim does not come to the Holy Land to understand politics or to understand the geography. First and foremost he is a religious pilgrim,"

[Kairos Palestine](#), and [‘Alternative Tourism Group’](#) wish to respond and contest that assertion about the nature and scope of pilgrimage.

It is our conviction that when Christian sisters and brothers travel to Palestine, they need to remember that a Christian pilgrimage is a spiritual journey following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ to renew one’s commitment to Jesus Christ and to live according to His teachings. Accordingly, there must be clear recognition of an obdurate conflict stemming from the nearly 45-year Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories indeed, beginning with the ‘Nakba’ in 1948. Under the dire circumstances of their lives, the Palestinians invite visitors- whether tourists or pilgrims, to see and witness the reality as it happens under a sinful and brutal military occupation.

Of course, pilgrims come for religious aims, to follow in the steps of Our Lord. And yet, Christian life cannot be separated from the life of the brothers and sisters. Jesus said: “Whatever you do to one of my brothers ...you do it to me”. Therefore the pilgrim too, should be informed about the real life of his/her brothers and sisters around the holy places.

Politics is not just about Israel and the Palestinian authority. Politics is what makes up our daily life. Christians in Palestine have a difficult life, check points, limitation of freedom, and limited economic scope. Many Palestinians languish in prisons while, Israelis, not conscious of the unjust measures of their government, accept the oppression and live in a situation of fear

Pilgrims should, therefore, add to their prayers and bear in their hearts the pains of their brothers and sisters around the holy places, Christians, Moslems and the Jews.

For true faith requires more from a Christian than unthinkingly reinforcing stereotypes and untruths. The genuine Christian pilgrim seeks the living Christ in the here and now, in solidarity with the oppressed. This becomes even more urgent when one considers that Christians legitimize the occupation by citing theologies that deny the essential Christian teachings of love and solidarity with the oppressed.

“Come and see” is our challenge – a challenge to see our olive groves destroyed, the bulldozers tear down our homes; our ancient terraces decimated; our communities and cities segregated by a separation wall; our children imprisoned; and our people dispossessed and exiled.

For Palestinian Christians, the holy sites are not mere tourist destinations —they are often their own local churches— places that have meaning in their every day worship. The people in these communities -- the “Living Stones” -- are the keepers of sacred traditions in the Holy Land and protectors of the places that mark events in the life of Christ and the prophets.

We hope that our clarifications about what constitutes true pilgrimage will empower Christians everywhere to re-evaluate their understanding of pilgrimage and that they will abandon the temptation to separate the religious from the political in our context. In our case, the religious has been made a pretext for imposing suffering on our people.

Our fervent hope is that people will come to us and be willing to find transformation – not merely to derive a false and individualistic self-satisfying, self-gratifying spirituality. For, an authentic Christian pilgrimage in our land must comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

In the Kairos document we wrote under 6.2:

*“In order to understand our reality, we say to the Churches: Come and see. We will fulfil our role to make known to you the truth of our reality, receiving you as pilgrims coming to us to pray, carrying a message of peace, love and reconciliation. You will know the facts and the people of this land, Palestinians and Israelis alike.”*

We ask you to pray and act in solidarity for the peacemakers and justice seekers in our land.

In solidarity,

***Kairos Palestine***

***Alternative Tourism Group***

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