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West Bank procession participants desire freedom of worship, movement

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 27, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

[Editor's Note: There is no homily this week because Bishop Gumbleton is traveling in the Middle East, including Palestine. He will return March 31. Here's a story and photos from his trip.]

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

BETHANY, West Bank -- The small Palm Sunday procession wound up the hill in this Palestinian village, making its way to where residents of Bethany once could cross the street into the Palestinian village of Bethpage.

Boutros Abu Shanab, 54, a Christian from Jerusalem, was reading from the Gospel of Mark in Arabic when the group reached the top of the hill and stood in front of the Israeli checkpoint at the gate of the Israeli separation barrier, or wall. The checkpoint is meant to allow Palestinians with permits through the wall. In practice, said local residents, no one is allowed through the gate.

The Passionists' monastery is cut off from Bethany by the wall, but the Comboni Sisters' convent straddles the border and has an entrance in Bethany. A border policeman could be seen on the Passionists' property.

"This is a procession of faith, and it will have a resolution of peace," said Abu Shanab.

About 50 Palestinians and international residents carrying banners and olive branches took part in the procession organized by the Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies, a nongovernmental organization based in Beit Sahour, West Bank. The organization aims to create links between Palestinians and people from around the world. Members of the Christian Peacemaker Team also participated.

"Two thousand years after Jesus walked in this area there is an apartheid wall here," said George Rishmawi, coordinator of the Siraj Center. "Many Palestinian Christians and Muslims are denied the right from going into Jerusalem and the right of worship. Christians from Jerusalem can participate in the traditional procession but if they are from the West Bank they need a permit from Israel."

Israel says it needs the separation barrier to prevent Palestinian terrorists from infiltrating into Israel and carrying out terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

On March 16, border policemen at the gate asked the procession to move back down the road away from the checkpoint, but the group refused and read from the Gospels at the site as planned.

Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, the retired auxiliary bishop of Detroit who was in the area with the human rights group Optical Illusions for a two-week study tour, approached the police at the checkpoint and asked them why the Palestinians who lived in Bethany were not permitted to cross. The police did not speak English, and no dialogue was possible.

"The traditional procession is more religious in terms of liturgy, but here the religion is being carried out through the mandate of Jesus in his hunger and thirst for justice," said Bishop Gumbleton. "To be here gives witness to the oppression and imprisonment of the Palestinians."

After 30 minutes, police became more insistent that participants leave the area, so the group moved onto the Comboni Sisters' property.

Rachelle Friesen, 22, of Winnipeg, Manitoba, said: "Right now I feel like I am acting out my faith.

"When you think about Jesus entering Jerusalem it was very political. This way is very close to the path of Jesus, both physically and literally. I can't separate the spiritual from the political. It is so much who Jesus was. To be participating in this is immensely spiritual. I will go to the procession in Jerusalem more for traditional reasons," she said.

Sarah McDonald, 36, a Mennonite from Iowa and Christian Peacemaker Team volunteer, said: "Jesus' life and ministry was focused on (confronting) injustices, oppression, ways people were bound both physically and spiritually. Jesus was about freeing people, and that really is the story of Lazarus.

"The occupation is a kind of a death, and everybody who sees what is happening needs to be involved in undoing the occupation, unbinding the people," she told Catholic News Service.

Bethany resident Suhad Mukahal, 46, said the wall had shut off her life from Jerusalem. When the wall was being built, she broke her hand trying to go to work by climbing over the separation barrier.

Now Mukahal, a nurse, said she just stays at home. Her 6-year-old son is sick and she cannot take him to the doctor at the government hospital in Jerusalem because she does not have a permit, she said. There are no government doctors in Bethany, and she cannot afford to pay a private doctor, she said.

"We used to come shopping here all the time. All the (Palestinian) Jerusalemites used to come here for shopping," said Helen Khader, 59, a Christian resident of Jerusalem who took a detour road to Bethany for the procession. "Now I pity the people who live here."

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