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## **A Sermon for Christmas 2010**

In 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4-6 we read that:

4. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; 5. it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6. it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

These are goals that Paul has set for us. And when we fall short of these goals, as from time to time we all do, we feel disappointed in ourselves. However these failures are learning experiences for us, and help to guide us to be better people and better Christians.

Now, while it is easy to see when others fail to act on the basis of Christian love, we often fail to see it in ourselves. This can happen, perhaps most often happens, when, without realizing it, we employ un-loving means to achieve goals we believe demonstrate Christian love at its finest. Loving ends can and do mask the fact of un-loving means. And the fact is that un-loving means are usually ineffective or counterproductive means as well.

For example, many of us shake our heads at the logjam that is our Congress, asking how it is that our representatives can seemingly too often appear to be placing ideological or partisan political considerations ahead of the good of our country. Time and again we see behaviors by members of both parties that seem motivated by a desire to place themselves or their party in a good light (or place the other party in a bad light) without regard to the effect on the people they were elected to serve. But I would be surprised if that is the way they see themselves or their actions, no matter how obvious it may seem to us as third party observers.

I know that many of you may be thinking of some example of these behaviors and are asking yourselves how can that be? How could they not realize how little Christian love is reflected in their actions? But before we start throwing stones, we should look carefully at the glass houses in which we live, and perhaps gain a little understanding and compassion (or should I say exhibit a little Christian love) in reaction to this behavior and, in so doing, help to correct it.

Consider, for example, the manner in which too many of us seem to react to the plight of the Christian communities in the Holy Land. For those of you who may not be aware of it, there have been since the dawn of Christianity, and are still today, Christian communities living in the Holy Land. But they live in the Holy Land as a minority in the Arab/Muslim societies of Palestine and other Arab countries in the Holy Land and as a minority in Israeli society.

Unfortunately it probably comes as no surprise that as minorities they suffer religious, political and economic discrimination and, at times, threatened and actual physical harm for no other reason than the fact they are Christians and are a minority. As a consequence of their treatment, we are witnessing a flight of Christians from the Holy Land that carries the very real

possibility of seeing the Holy Land devoid of living Christian communities in a very few years.

Yes, Christians living in the Holy Land are fleeing from war and economic conditions along with their Muslim and Jewish counterparts. But they are also fleeing from economic, political and social discrimination based on their Christianity. And this was the case before the Palestinian-Israeli disputes arose and, unless we speak up in support of Christians in the Holy Land, will continue even after political reconciliation comes about in the Holy Land.

In that part of the Holy Land that includes Israel and Palestine, the current disputes between Israelis and Palestinians not only exacerbate the problem but act to thwart effective protests of the manner in which Christians living in the Holy Land are treated.

Partisan political/ideological passions related to the Palestinian-Israeli dispute have risen to such extraordinary heights that those who would protest the way Christians living there are treated tend to focus only on the acts or omission of the side of they oppose. And that tends to cause that side to dismiss the protest as politically motivated.

But even before we get to that point, the political/ideological passions relating to Palestinian-Israeli disputes can and do hijack the Christian protests and turn them into debates about those disputes. In those cases points raised as to how Christians are treated are diluted at best or, more typically, simply sidelined and forgotten.

Effective protests against actions that harm Christians in the Holy Land are in this manner either dismissed or co-opted, thwarted or drowned out and Christians continue to flee the Holy Land.

Does all this sound more than faintly reminiscent of the way our congresspeople “discuss” (and I say that in quotes) healthcare, the financial crisis and virtually every other pressing issue of import today? Rather than focusing on the problems, the “discussions,” again in quotes, seem to be seen as tools to make one party look good or the other to look bad. The deficit is too large, medical costs are too high and the country is literally going broke. But all that seems to be treated as secondary to narrow interests. Who cares whether a solution offered is effective or not, is it compatible with my left of center or right of center ideology?

Who cares whether an act or omission is harmful to Christians in the Holy Land, will it make Israel or the Palestinians look bad if I raise it?

This is not to say that ideological/partisan political concerns, and the issues related to the Palestinian-Israeli disputes, are not real and important, and should not be addressed. It is just to say that when the house is on fire, in discussing how to put it out let's concentrate on the most effective way to do so and not, at that time, other issues.

Regarding the plight of the Christians in the Holy Land, this means a focus on stopping the actions that are adversely affecting them irrespective of who commits them: Palestinian or Israeli. The justice of protests against Israeli or Palestinian actions harmful to Christians does not affect the justice of a position taken in favor of them with respect to the political/ideological and other issues that divide them.

Archbishop Elias Chacour of the Melkite Church in the Holy Land, who, as a young child, saw his village in Israel evacuated by force and then destroyed by the government, has said "We don't need anyone else to become the enemy of the Jews or the Arabs, we need people to

become the common friend of both." [source:  
<http://www.catholicity.com/commentary/hudson/08513.html>]

Remembering the power of Christian love can help us keep our perspective and show us how we can remain passionate about our political views without diminishing the humanity of those who don't share our views. And it can help us to keep our views and passions in balance, so that we see clearly that there is no conflict between criticizing those in the Holy Land whose actions are adversely affecting Christians while supporting them against those whose actions are adversely affecting them.

But we diminish ourselves if in the face of acts and omissions that cause suffering to Christians living in the Holy Land we keep silent unless they are committed by a side we do not favor politically.

No side has a monopoly on such acts or omissions. Consider the impact on Christian minorities living in the Holy Land of these sentiments:

David Rotem, a member of Israel's Knesset and author of the controversial bill that would require all Israeli citizens to swear loyalty to Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state": "Tyranny of the majority is the heart of democracy. Call it what you want but democracy is the rule of the majority. And it's not a tyranny if the majority decides against the minorities." [Source: [www.Alternet.org](http://www.Alternet.org)]

The Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, a formal Egyptian state body headed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, "Egypt [is], according to its constitution, an Islamic State" and "the citizenship rights of non-Muslims [are] conditional on their abiding by the Islamic Identity of the State." [Source: [www.ChristianPost.com](http://www.ChristianPost.com) ]

And, I would add, nor should we be silent with respect to the wounds we inflict on ourselves when we forget the teachings of Christian love. Let me read to you part of a story that appeared in the newspaper The Guardian in the United Kingdom (online on the Internet on Tuesday 26 October 2010):

For decades rain has penetrated the 500-year-old lead roof [of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem], but local church politics stood in the way of critical repairs. Water runs down its internal walls, causing decay and condensation. A rotting cross beam is a serious problem – as is the risk of electrical short-circuit and fire. Major repairs to the church were last carried out in 1842, following an earthquake.

Since then urgent restoration has been prevented by arguments over who has the right to restore the collapsing roof amongst the three Christian denominations which share the custody of this monumental 6th century structure – the Greek Orthodox Church, the Latins (Roman Catholics) under the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenian Orthodox.

"We own over 80% of the church," explained Theopolus, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, adding that the most visited part of this Byzantine church, the Grotto, "is owned by the Greeks and the Latins".

Not only has the Palestinian Authority intervened, it has already designated a million dollars into a special building fund. It is assumed that the churches and other donors will also put cash into the account which needs between \$12–\$20 million. . . .

Last week, the tensions that led to frequent deadlocks between the churches over building maintenance were on display when a Greek Orthodox priest carried a mop and a bucket of water up from the grotto via the staircase belonging to the Franciscans. An Armenian priest blocked the way by closing a door, leaving hapless tourists stranded at the bottom of the stairs, unable to leave the grotto for two hours.

Disputes over cleaning and a bucket sound minor, but similar disagreements between the co-owners date back to the Crusades.

The way in which our representatives relate to each other at the expense of the good of the people, the way in which we react to those with whom we disagree with respect to the Palestinian-Israel disputes at the expense of the Christians living in the Holy Land, the way in which we react to other denominations at the expense of Christianity as a whole: They are all aspects of the same issue: the effects of a failure to show Christian love and to let Christian love inform our lives every day, every minute.

Now please join me in a prayer for Christians living in the Holy Land.

## A Prayer for Christians in the Holy Land

Lord we pray to you today for our Christian brothers and sisters living in the Holy Land.

We are distressed that, because of the acts and failures to act of those under whose rule they live, with each passing year more and more Christians leave the Holy Land to find shelter elsewhere as fewer and fewer Christians find the Holy Land a welcoming place to live.

We are distressed that, because of the acts and failures to act of those under whose rule they live, Christians living in the Holy Land find it more and more difficult to express their faith in You.

We are distressed that, because of the acts and failures to act of those under whose rule they live, Christians living in the Holy Land find it more and more difficult to talk about You to those who have not yet found you.

We are distressed that, because of the acts and failures to act of those under whose rule they live, Christians living in the Holy Land face discrimination and too often fear for their physical safety.

We are distressed that, because of the acts and failures to act of those under whose rule they live, Christians who wish to live in the cities where You were born, where You were raised and where You died find it more and more difficult to purchase homes there or to remain there.

We are distressed that too few Christians worldwide have risen to try to take effective actions to end these circumstance and that too few Christians worldwide even show concern for, let alone unity with, Christians living in the Holy Land.

And we are distressed that too few of us are among those too few who act and care.

But we are determined not to abandon our Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. We seek not that those who do evil to our Christian brothers and sisters in Holy Land be punished. Rather we beseech you to shine Your Light on those whose words and deeds are driving our brothers and sisters from the Holy Land, to show them the error of their ways, to guide them on a righteous path.

We beseech you to assure, and to help us assure, a continued and thriving Christian presence in the Holy Land.

And we ask You to give our Christian brothers and sisters living in the Holy Land the strength to withstand these assaults until that time when peace and safety return to them and Christians again find the Holy Land a welcoming place to live and worship.

Amen.