

LIAISON COMMITTEE

Address by Fr. Gabriel Naddaf, Spiritual leader of the Israeli Christian Recruitment Forum – delivered at the symposium “Israeli Christians: Breaking Free? The advent of an independent Christian voice in Israel -September 23, 2013, Jerusalem.

Ladies and Gentlemen
Greetings

I bless you for coming [to the symposium], and I am proud to stand here in front of you.

At the beginning of my remarks, let me say a few basic things about the Christian community in the State [of Israel] .

We are Israeli Christians, living as a minority within a minority.

It is a quiet community - respectable, tolerant and proud of the good relations between with the Jewish inhabitants of the land the other communities. That is a cause of great pride for me. From the past to the present, good and reliable relationships have always been maintained between members of the community and Jews in Israel.

The State has demonstrated a considerate attitude towards the community even though the community lacks wise leadership of its own that would lead it in the right path of full engagement with the Jewish community. For there are some people who are considered Christians who are opposed to anything that will help the integration of the Christian community, and also, to my dismay, there are elements that are neither Jewish nor Christian that want to sabotage this development for all kinds of personal interests. Those Christians who oppose are not going the way of Christendom.

In spite of this, the Christian minority – which is mostly urban and highly educated – has tried, in one way or another, to become aware of this discrimination. There are forces that press [the Christian minority] to the margin so that it will remain the victim of a nationalism that is not its own and to a conflict that it is not related to.

In spite of all this, a large part of the Christians are leaning toward breaking free from the notion that they are shackled in the ropes of bureaucracy and the rest are at a loss, hovering between the option to break free of the constrictions that bind them and their loyalty to the State.

I want to make an important point before going further: that our roots as Christians are engraved and rooted in this land still from the time of Jesus, for from here grew the teaching of Jesus.

Christianity is a continuation of the Jewish religion. Its roots are in the Tanach [Jewish Bible], in the Book of the Prophets in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Christianity considers itself bound by the Tanach and not in separation from it. The difference is that Christianity sees that what is said in the Book of the

Prophets was materialized and realized at the time of the New Testament in the life of Jesus.

That means that the first Jewish Christian community saw in the existence of Jesus the messiah that the People Israel had expected and still expects.

Christians believe, according to the New Testament – that Jesus is the Son of the blessed Mary of Nazareth, the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem, lived at the time of Emperor Octavian Augustus, grew up in Judea, Samaria and Galilee. Jesus sacrificed himself for the forgiveness of human beings and for the unity of the Jewish world and the Greek world. He was resurrected on the third day after his death and ascended into heaven forty days after the resurrection and sits on the right of God and thus united humanity with God.

In 641 Arab troops under the leadership of the Caliphate of Omar and Abu Bakr conquered the Land of Israel and Syria from the hands of the Byzantines. The population in the land was largely made up of Jews and Christians – Greeks, Aramaeans and Latins. Restrictions forbade them to pray or to live as they wished.

In 1099, the Crusaders conquered many territories in Israel and began the Crusader period. We are not proud of this period because it stands against all our theology and our faith and we reject it completely, as we today reject that which opposes our faith and our theology.

Our very belonging to the land, to our roots - and in light of what is happening in the Arab countries, and the terrible suffering of Christians in these countries, and the daily killing, just because they are Christians - our youth feels that they must sacrifice for the State that protects them.

And thus began to take shape the idea among young people and a large majority of Christian families to expose the freedom of their thinking, despite opposition from amongst the Arab population that controls it. From that to the establishment of the Israeli Christian Recruitment Forum the distance was short and vigorous because, again, the Christian majority has always awaited a courageous leadership that would be its address, instead of all kinds of people who do not represent it, except when a contentious issue arises and they represent themselves as speaking in its name.

Today this is over and no one will speak on our behalf and not impose on us an identity or nationality convenient for him. We are free to choose or, actually, revert to our true roots and follow the path that we believe in. And you can check: that recently, after the establishment of the Israeli Christian Recruitment Forum, how young men and women stood up and shouted to the media and raised their voice boldly and said: Enough!

And this is what we as the Israeli Christian Recruitment Forum, established in 2012 by Major Ihab Shlayan of the Christian community, are fighting for today.

Our move is to integrate the members of the Christian community into Israeli society and its state institutions to serve it and give our part, not just in words, but also in deeds. It is not enough just to study or work. The state that protects us also deserves that we give our share towards thriving and defense.

Therefore, very brave people from amongst the Christian community, got up - and here I must say a word of thanks to Major Ihab Shlayan, a son of the Christian community who initiated the Forum - and I joined him like many others, and welcomed the development because time has come. And when will the time come if not in these days in light of the situation around us and the reality of our lives. We broke the barrier of fear and go forward to prove our loyalty to the State and meet the duties and receive the rights, but also desire that the State will want and support us.

Therefore, our idea, thankfully, brought great benefits and big success within the Christian community and the number of IDF recruits and those serving in the National Service rose in great numbers, and all that after a short period of existence of the Forum and its activities. This is an important example: according to the latest figures, the number of recruits to the army in 2012 was 35 Christians, and this year 2013 it reached the number of 120 Christian recruits.

Despite the fact that all the threats and incitements against have not ceased until now, we - and I personally who is categorized [by the security authorities] as being under a Level 3 threat - continue on the path because the State of Israel is our heart. The State of Israel is a sacred and strong state and its people, Jews and Christians, are members of one covenant.

We must succeed in this historic process because if not, heaven forbid, we do not succeed, we and our young people will be lost and without a future, and this action will not repeated itself for another 100 years.

With your permission, before I finish, I would like to thank, in front of you, the members of the Association Im Tirzu who partnered with us from the beginning, and for all with which they truly help us. Thanks to all Christian associations which are with us, St. Georgios, the St. Sophia Association, the Aramaic Association and others .

A personal thanks goes to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who invited us to his office in Jerusalem and supported us and declared the establishment of a joint council for cooperation between us and the Prime Minister's Office to promote the process. Thanks to all representatives of ministries, of deputy ministers and Israeli parliamentarians who stand beside us, and to the heads of organizations, the Jewish people and to the supportive Israeli press and global support.

I also thank many people whom we do not know personally, but know that they are working for the success of this national vision - thank you also very, very much.

Father Gabriel Naddaf

The Spiritual Father of the Forum for the Drafting of the Christian Community in Israel