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## A Statement of Conscience

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## A STATEMENT OF CONSCIENCE

This statement was released by the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies on November 17, 1967. It was written by Msgr. Oesterreicher and also signed by Fr. Flannery.

ONCE again, the Arab-Israeli conflict is being discussed by the Security Council. Once again there are charges and countercharges, invectives and threats. Once again the Council seems to be unable to end the crisis. It is this unrelieved tension in the Middle East that compels us to take a public stand and plead with our fellow Christians to make their voices heard too.

We are mindful of the words of the Lord that came to the prophet Ezekiel: "If the watchman sees the sword coming and fails to sound the warning trumpet, so that the sword comes and takes a victim from among the people, I will hold the watchman accountable for the victim's blood, even though the victim deserved his death because of his sin. So it is with you, son of man; I have appointed you watchman for the house of Israel" (33:6-7). Since every Christian has a prophetic calling, he, too, is God's watchman in the world and must, when needed, sound the alarm. With this truth in mind, we make the following affirmations:

1. No matter how often the Arab delegates have, with massive assistance from the Russian ambassador—whose country is largely responsible for the conflagration of last June—accused Israel, she is not the aggressor. Her strike at the Egyptian air force in the early morning hours of June 5 was clearly an act of defense. For years, terrorists had entered her territory, hostile guns had shelled her settlements in the North. Before Israel made her move, Arab leaders had threatened to wipe her off the map; state controlled radios and street gatherings in Arab lands had clamored for a holy war; President Nasser had demanded that the United Nations Emergency Force, stationed in the Gaza Strip, be withdrawn from the Egyptian-Israeli border; hostile troops had been amassed at her borders; the nearby waterways had been closed to her merchant ships, all traffic vital to her economic life and thus to her very existence had been cut off. Her

assault on Egypt's aircraft was, therefore, the action of a country that refused to be strangled to death.

2. Israel came into being with the active support of the world community. We can think of no better title to her sovereignty than the sponsorship of a majority of nations at the time of her birth. Yet, her claim does not rest with international law alone; it is also based on the work of her hands. A former generation drained malaria-infested marshes, the former and the present ones have turned barren land into gardens. Not only has Israel made the desert bloom, she has created the economic, social, and cultural conditions for a just, a truly human society. Israel's leaders accepted the challenge of the Balfour Declaration (November 2, 1917) and turned her into a homeland for all Jews who wish or need to live there. In fact, so solid has her advance been that this tiny country is able to send teams of highly gifted and skilled men to developing countries, thereby doing her share in making the community of man a happy reality.

Even if all this were not so, Israelis now have lived in the land of their forefathers—from which, incidentally, Jews were never fully absent—for almost twenty years. They have taken root there, children were born, men and women died, couples married, and soldiers fought. It seems to us that as a living person has a right to go on living—a right that no neighbor or society can deny him—so a commonwealth as alive as Israel has a right to peaceful existence. We thus affirm Israel's right to stay securely on the soil her farmers, workers, thinkers, and teachers have reclaimed by the sweat of their brows. As Christians, we must go even further: The people of Israel not only have a right to live—they have a vocation to live for the Lord. We hope that it will be granted them to bear witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on His favored land, as never before.

3. We are encouraged by the recent statement of Jordan's King Hussein that the Arab world is ready to recognize Israel as "a fact of life" even though the government of Syria let it be known that the King did not speak in its name and even though his own foreign minister did not show the same sense of reality. At the Security Council's meeting of November 13, Mr. Abdul Monem Rifai declared there could be no peace talks unless Israel withdrew first from all the territories she conquered in the Six Day War. The Israeli

Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, however, reiterated his government's determination not to give up the occupied territories prior to any direct peace negotiations. He also insisted upon adjusted frontiers to meet the security requirements of the State of Israel.

We fully support Israel's stand as reasonable and fair. It would be absurd to expect Israel to withdraw behind the armistice lines of 1949 and thus, for instance, return to Syria the very hills from which heavy guns kept Galilean kibbutzim under fire and from which minor and major attacks could be launched again. It would be utterly unrealistic to demand of Israel that she move back to borders so vulnerable as to invite invasion, to borders that make it easy for Egypt to close the Suez Canal and the Strait of Tiran at will. We do not think that Israel wants to hold on forever to the territories she seized in the course of fighting. If she were to do so, she would assume a tremendous economic and administrative burden, one too heavy to bear; she would in all likelihood face an Arab irredenta, the suppression of which would take her away from many essential tasks; finally, she might lose the sympathy of some of her friends.

There is still another matter: Israel's resolve not to relinquish the occupation ahead of face-to-face negotiations. The occupied territories are the only palpable argument by which she can hope to persuade the Arab states that they should come to the peace table. They are an assurance against the resumption of hostilities in the near future. They are a constant reminder that the former state of belligerency—which the Arab leaders considered, for eighteen long years, the normal relationship between their states and Israel—must give way to one of peace, of friendly coexistence and fruitful cooperation. Now is the time for the United Nations to do its utmost that "swords shall be beaten into plowshares" (Is 2:4; Mic 4:3). The world community must try everything possible to induce the Arab governments and Israel, the foes of yesterday, to sit down as partners to a peace conversation so that they may be friends tomorrow.

4. Linked to the problem of occupied territories is that of the city of Jerusalem, at least in the mind of outsiders. To the Israelis there is no problem: They are determined never to go back to a Jerusalem cut in two. The united city, a demand of history as much as of Jewish consciousness, is simply not a negotiable item for them. Who would not see that to the Israeli people and to Jews everywhere the streets

of Jerusalem, her very stones, are soaked with meaning! Moreover, when the Jordanians held the Old City, they closed the border so that no Israeli Jew or Arab could visit any of his holy places; they destroyed thirty-five out of thirty-six synagogues; they used tombstones from the ancient Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives to pave the footpaths—and latrines—of the Arab legion camp in Bethany. To cede the Old City to Jordan would be for Israelis to participate in those acts of impiety.

Many Christians think of Jerusalem, not as a city belonging to Jews only, but as one belonging to all the descendants of Abraham, indeed to all mankind. Was it not from Zion that the Lord's commands went out, and from Jerusalem, His word and revelation (Is 2:3)? Indeed. But must we draw from this the conclusion that Jerusalem's status should be that of an international city, that she should be under the protection and supervision of the major or of all the powers of the world? The experience the cities of Vienna and Berlin have had under four power rule should stand as a warning: To bring these powers into the Holy City is to jeopardize peace. It could well turn the city into a nest of intrigues, a meeting place for spies, a home for professional revolutionaries.

We are certain that Israel would be a faithful guardian of all holy places. But Israel in no way insists on such a guardianship. In fact, she is willing, even eager, to turn the various sanctuaries over to accredited representatives of the respective religious communities and grant them extraterritorial rights. To our minds, her offer is clear evidence of her good will and desire to live in harmony with Muslims and all Christian Churches. Soon after the reunification of Jerusalem in June of this year, the Israeli Parliament passed a bill that promised protection of all sanctuaries from desecration and guaranteed unhindered access to them. This law testifies to the acumen of Israeli leaders; what is more, it bears witness to their lack of rancor. Only when one remembers the contempt thrown to Jews by the Jordanian government, which for eighteen years prohibited their pilgrimage to the Western Wall and to Rachel's tomb; when one remembers the sins of Christendom, particularly the cruelty of those crusaders who in 1099 burned most Jews of Jerusalem—huddled in their synagogue—alive, can one appreciate the spirit of reconciliation embodied in this law.

5. Another critical question, perhaps the most critical one, is that

of Palestinian refugees. In discussing it, one ought to keep these points in mind: First, it is a gross misrepresentation to say that, at the time of the first armed Israeli-Arab confrontation in 1948, Jews drove their Arab neighbors out. Second, the shutting up of these refugees in camps is not a page of glory in Arab history—Germans, for instance, integrated their brethren whom Poland and Czechoslovakia had expelled from their native soil into the economic, social, and cultural life of West Germany. Finally, Israel absorbed, in a kind of exchange, hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Still, for the sake of justice and peace, Israel should again offer financial compensation to those who lost their houses and fields, also assistance in uniting families that had been forced apart. In addition, an international resettlement fund could be set up. Yet, the tragic lot of these refugees will in all probability not be ended prior to a peace treaty; their suffering will cease only as a result of, or concomitant to, a covenant between the present adversaries.

Though the final settlement of this intensely human problem will have to await the settlement of many others, its terms and methods could and should be prepared now. Statesmen with the help of scientists could draw up and disclose blueprints for the desalting of sea water and the irrigation of Arab and Israeli lands, as a promise of how all would prosper together. The possibilities of economic cooperation could be discussed publicly in order to show that the entire Middle East would benefit from an agreement among the armed camps that for the moment have stopped firing but are still confronting one another. The present cease-fire must be a gate to lasting concord.

"Seek peace and pursue it" is the admonition of one of the psalmists, "Happy the peacemakers!" the praise of Christ.