News



Seattle Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Arturo Cepeda, and Fr. Firas Aridah, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Jifna, West Bank, concelebrate Mass Jan. 21 at the West Bank church. (CNS/Debbie Hill)



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Building walls, whether between Israel and the Palestinian territories or the United States and Mexico, can only serve to separate people and create more isolation, said Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle.

"Walls can't bring any positive aspect to any country," he said Jan. 21, during a visit to this West Bank village. "The image is very negative. 'I am keeping you out of my life.' ... It creates more resentment and isolation. It makes it impossible to see the other."

Elizondo was among 10 Hispanic U.S. bishops visiting the Holy Land and meeting with Israelis and Palestinians to get a better understanding of the Holy Land situation and to advocate for "bridges not walls."

The bishop said he had returned to the Holy Land for the first time in 30 years and had been disappointed by the feeling that the situation had gotten worse rather than better.

"It is a tragic feeling coming to the Holy Land," a place which for centuries has not had peace, he said. "It is a long process. A very slow process. I praise and pray for people in that process, but you have to be ready for martyrdom all that time. We humans are very slow learners."

While acknowledging that terrorist violence was one of the push factors for the creation of the Israeli separation barrier — which includes a series of 25-foot cement walls and fences and is expected to extend more than 400 miles — Auxiliary Bishop Arturo Cepeda of Detroit said the whole use of the concept of walls prevents people from "seeing the other as a human person."

"If we are not able to see the other as a human person, we are missing the point of who we are. The message is that this is about people, it is a human crisis ... the challenge is what is the most effective way to communicate this," he said. "This is a human crisis. In our USA, we are facing a very, very hard human crisis, which is our immigrants. It is a terrible crisis."

Fr. Firas Aridah, parish priest at St. Joseph Church, told the visiting bishops there are more than 140 Israeli settlements and 636 Israeli checkpoints within the West Bank.

"We need the recognition of the simple human principle: No people has the right to impose his occupation on another people. We are waiting for the day when our churches will ring their bells, celebrating freedom and justice for all, Palestinians and Israelis," Aridah said.

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Earlier, Elizondo and Cepeda concelebrated Mass at St. Joseph Parish. In his homily, Elizondo told parishioners that, without forgiveness, there can be no dialogue.

"Regardless of the nationality — whether it be Palestinian, Israeli, Mexican or American — we are all created by the same Father and all redeemed by the same savior, Jesus Christ," he said. "Forgiveness is the best and the most difficult, but the most powerful thing we can ever offer anybody. Forgiveness is a gift from God. It is very tough."

Cepeda reminded parishioners that it was God who gave them the courage to "cry out for peace, justice, dignity and freedom."

"Let us never ever stop crying out for what we believe in as people of faith, as Christians, as people of this land," he urged. "We belong here, we belong to God, and God will give us the courage."

The same day, other members of the delegation visited Holy Family Parish in Gaza. They included Bishop Oscar Cantu of Las Cruces, New Mexico, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace; Bishop Nelson Perez of Cleveland, chairman of the USCCB Subcommittee on Hispanic Affairs; Bishop Felipe de Jesus Estevez of St. Augustine, Florida; Auxiliary Bishop Octavio Cisneros of Brooklyn, New York; Bishop Armando Ochoa of Fresno,

California; Auxiliary Bishop Alberto Rojas of Chicago; retired Bishop Placido Rodriguez of Lubbock, Texas; and retired Auxiliary Bishop Rutilio del Riego of San Bernardino, California.