

Open Letter from Christian Leaders in Palestine to his Eminence Pope Francis regarding the Vatican's participation in the friendly match between Israel and Argentina on June 9.

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. (Isa. 1:17)

We write to you as Palestinian Christian faith leaders, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee, at this painful moment in our people's lives. Yesterday, our nation buried a young nurse, Razan Al-Najjar, who was shot in the back as she tried to assist injured protesters. This young angel's life of grace and humanitarianism was destroyed by an Israeli sniper's bullet that ripped through her heart.

Nonetheless, we have pledged that her message of love and peace, the same message our Lord Saviour carried from heaven to earth, will not be silenced.

We write to you to inform you that your Eminence, and the respected name of the Holy See, are being abused to silence the voice of the weak and dispossessed, and to whitewash the crimes of the oppressor. The Israeli government is funding and marketing an exhibition soccer match between the world Class Argentinian team and Israel, to be held in Jerusalem, to shift the world's attention away from the innocent blood being spilt in Gaza, and to solidify Trump's Embassy move that violates the international consensus and makes peace impossible.

Rumors abound that this game, and the Argentinian team which refused to cancel it, will be blessed by an emissary sent by the Vatican. We dearly pray that this information is not true, for it goes against the humanism and faith in peace that your Church is dedicated to.

If the rumors about the Holy See blessing this game are wrong, then we call on you to make that clear. And if this rumor is correct, we urge you to distance the Vatican from this match and from the Argentinian team's visit to the Holy Land. Miri Regev, the Israeli Sports Minister, has celebrated the match by posting videos with genocidal football chants against Palestinian communities. She has called African migrants a cancer and supports removing Palestinians from Jerusalem.

After years of unending bloodshed and pain, we, as Palestinian Christian leaders and figures, would feel betrayed by the Vatican if it stood with our oppressors and helped them cover their crimes. Today, our lives are harder than ever! The Christian community in Palestine is being suffocated by the occupation, and even the holiest and most sacred of our churches are being abused. We, the oldest Christian community in the world, are being wiped out by an occupation that wants our whole nation removed from this land.

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:8-9)"

Things are beyond urgent. We are on the verge of collapse. The current status-quo is unsustainable. As a Palestinian Christian community, we are struggling to save the Christian

presence in this land. Our only hope as Christians comes from the fact that in Jerusalem, the city of God, and our city, there is an empty tomb, and Jesus Christ who triumphed over death and sin, brought to us and to all humanity, new life and peace.

At this moment in time, we urge you not to meet with the Argentinian Football team or any of its players, and not to have Vatican representation during any part of the visit. We urge you to do no harm to us as we struggle for peace and justice, and in doing so, to take a symbolic stand with peace against whitewashing Israel's violations of international law.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Justice), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me". (Matthew 5:10-11)