



# HOLY LAND PILGRIMAGE GUIDELINES

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

› Department for International Affairs







## › The Nature of Pilgrimage

The desire to be a pilgrim is deeply rooted in human nature. Pilgrimages to sacred places are made as acts of devotion, penance, thanksgiving, and to seek blessings or miracles. There are many examples throughout Scripture including the journey made by Abraham and the Exodus story, as well as the pilgrimages to Jerusalem undertaken by Jesus himself.

A pilgrim is not a pious tourist but is on a sacred journey to meet God, and in meeting God, the pilgrim returns home changed. "There never was a pilgrim who did not come back to his village with one less prejudice and one more idea."

## › A Holy Land Pilgrimage

The Church of Jerusalem is the Mother Church of the Christian faith: it was from Jerusalem that the apostles went forth to spread the Gospel and it was to the Church of Jerusalem that other early communities of faith looked for guidance.

For a Christian, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land can be a life changing and challenging experience. It can make every Bible reading come alive and have new

meaning. "We understand Scripture better when we have seen Judea with our own eyes and discovered what still remains of ancient towns which Jesus himself knew." By going to the Holy Land, it becomes real in the life of Christians because of what it stands for. It is as Pope Benedict said, the 'fifth gospel' which is not written in ink but written on stones.

Visiting the Holy Land is perhaps the ultimate pilgrimage experience because the pilgrim literally walks in the footsteps of the Lord and his disciples. We take our place in a long line of Christian pilgrims, that stretches back to the earliest centuries of the Church's history. It is a privileged opportunity to come to know the land where Jesus was born, preached, healed, suffered, died, and rose from the dead. To walk in the footsteps of Jesus can renew our Christian lives and we can be changed by what we encounter.

A pilgrimage to the Holy Land is also an important act of solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters living there. Our presence is an encouragement to them that they are not forgotten and meeting the local Christian community is therefore an essential part of any pilgrimage.





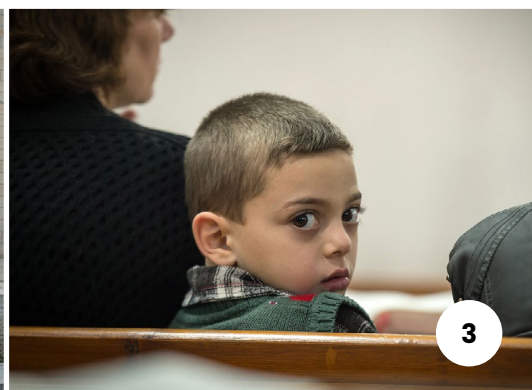
## › The Christians of the Holy Land

Christians in the Holy Land are often referred to as “living stones”. Their ancestors were there when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost, and they were the first to venerate the holy places, the actual stones, associated with Jesus. These Christian families have remained in the Holy Land for generations and have an important responsibility for maintaining Christian life there.

Local Christians belong to various denominations including Catholics (Latin, Melkite, Maronite, Armenian, Syrian, Chaldean), Orthodox (Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Coptic), Anglican, Lutheran, and Evangelical. While each denomination maintains its own distinct identity, Christian families and associations are often mixed.

Most of the Holy Land’s Christians are ethnically Arab. They are an integral part of society in Palestine, Israel, and Jordan. Christian schools, hospitals and welfare organisations serve people of all faiths and backgrounds. Many of these projects are generously supported by churches across the world.

Christians also face the same political, social, and economic challenges affecting people throughout the region. Local churches play an important role in working for justice and peace, which we are called to make part of our prayer and pilgrimages.







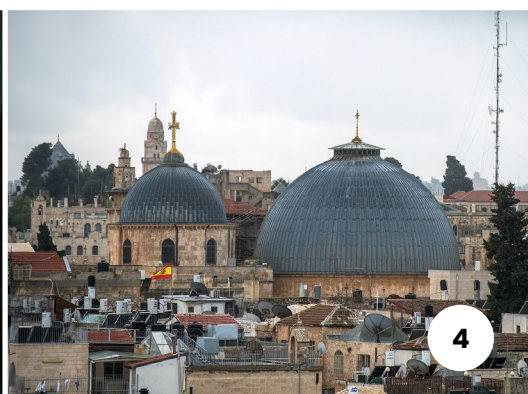
## › Christians in Jerusalem

Jerusalem is one of the world's oldest cities and the location of important holy sites in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Throughout history, jurisdiction over the city has been fiercely contested and remains a matter of dispute. Israel has controlled the whole of Jerusalem since 1967, including East Jerusalem which most of the international community considers occupied territory.

The local Church has emphasised that it is not for us, as Christians, to determine who, how and under what conditions the city should be governed, but it is our duty to defend a vision of Jerusalem that is universal, multicultural, open, and the common patrimony of all.

Today Jerusalem is home to around 8,000–9,000 Christians (1–2% of the population), mainly Palestinians living in the Old City and East Jerusalem. Numerically they are a diminishing part of the population but still make an important contribution to life in the city through their parishes, schools, social services, and youth movements.

Many of Jerusalem's Christians face difficulties in securing housing and employment. Often families are separated from relatives in the West Bank, as the city is increasingly cut off from neighbouring areas such as Bethlehem and Ramallah.







## › Christians in the West Bank

The West Bank has been under occupation by Israel since 1967, with some areas under the limited control of the Palestinian Authority since the mid-1990s.

It is home to around 40,000 Christians (1-2% of the population). Some 25,000 live in the Bethlehem area (Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala), around 10,000 in Ramallah, and around 5,000 in the North, the majority in Zababdeh – a large Christian village. Here too Christians play a vibrant role in society including through their educational and social organisations, which serve the wider population.

Like other Palestinians, life for many Christians in the West Bank is marked by the occupation, conflict, and economic hardship, which has resulted in high levels of emigration.

Christians in the West Bank are often restricted from visiting their holy places or family members in Jerusalem.







## > Christians in Gaza

Gaza is a small strip of land on the Mediterranean coast bordering Israel and Egypt. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 but, with Egypt, has kept the region under blockade since the militant Islamist group Hamas came to power in 2007. In the past decade, Gaza has suffered four wars, costing thousands of lives.

It is home to almost two million Palestinians including a small Christian community of fewer than 1,000 people. Like elsewhere in the Holy Land, Christian organisations including medical facilities, schools, and services for people with disabilities are open to the whole population.

Given the restrictions on accessing Gaza, it is almost impossible for pilgrims to encounter the local Christian community. It is, however, possible to support them through your prayers and charities operating in the region. This can be an important part of your pilgrimage.







## › Christians in Israel

The State of Israel was formed in 1948 and is the only country in the world where most citizens are Jewish.

Around 160,000 Christians live here (2% of the population), mostly in the North including Nazareth and Haifa. The majority are ethnically Arab, with full rights and citizenship. Christian citizens and Christian organisations have long played a significant role in Israeli society.

Economically the Christian community in Israel is relatively better off than elsewhere in the Holy Land. However, like other Arab citizens, Christians may sometimes face discrimination in housing, employment, and access to public services.

There are also a smaller number of Christians, predominantly living in Tel Aviv, who came to Israel with Jewish family members or as migrant workers.







## › Christians in Jordan

Jordan became independent in 1946 and is ruled by the Hashemite royal family. It is home to more than 200,000 Christians (at least 2% of the population), who play a full and active role in society.

In recent years, many Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria have sought sanctuary in Jordan, with the support and welcome of local churches.

Although in general Christians in Jordan are economically better off than their neighbours in Palestine, and not affected by the same challenges of occupation or conflict, many people still face economic and social hardship, especially among the refugee population.







## > The Spirit of Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is not a political exercise, but pilgrims should always have an opportunity to understand issues affecting the local Church and communities. Any pilgrimage should be both journey of faith as well as a prayerful search for justice and peace.

A true pilgrimage to the Holy Land must also have a good balance between visiting the holy places and encountering the local Christian community. This can be done in many ways depending on the interests of the pilgrimage group. Many pilgrims are deeply moved by what they experience and find themselves inspired to support the people they meet.

## > Practical Details

When planning a pilgrimage, groups should contact a UK-based Christian pilgrimage company that works directly with a Christian pilgrimage company in the Holy Land. This is important as it ensures your pilgrimage will support and encounter the local Christian community. The Bishops' Conference Department for International Affairs can assist in finding a

suitable company and can be contacted via: [enquiries@cbcew.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@cbcew.org.uk)

There are different types of accommodation throughout the Holy Land depending on budget including hotels, guesthouses, and pilgrim hosts. Many Christians in the Holy Land face economic disadvantages so it is important that Christian businesses are used wherever possible. Some accommodation recommended by the local Church can be found on these links:

### *Jerusalem*

[cicts.org/en/guesthouses-jerusalem](https://cicts.org/en/guesthouses-jerusalem)

### *Outside Jerusalem*

[cicts.org/en/other-guesthouses-outside-jerusalem](https://cicts.org/en/other-guesthouses-outside-jerusalem)

It is also important to use accredited guides from the Christian community. They are not only knowledgeable about the holy sites but understand the priorities and sensitivities of pilgrims. Your guide can be arranged through the pilgrimage company. They will meet each group at the airport and stay with them until the day of departure.



## › Solidarity

An essential element of any Holy Land pilgrimage is meeting the local Christian community. Pilgrims are called to show their solidarity with the local Church by becoming acquainted with the 'living stones' – meeting them, listening to their stories, and sharing their faith experience.

We encourage pilgrimage leaders to work with their pilgrimage company in making arrangements to visit Christian parishes, institutions, or charities as part of the itinerary. These encounters are often the lasting memory that people have of their pilgrimage and result in many groups establishing sustained relations with Christians in the Holy Land.

A particularly important aspect of this encounter is celebrating Sunday Mass in one of the Latin Patriarchate parishes. Pilgrims are warmly welcomed by the local community and will often be asked to take part by reading or singing in English. Pilgrims are also able to spend time meeting and talking to parishioners after Mass, where many lasting friendships are formed. Groups may wish to visit the Latin Patriarchate, the headquarters of the Church in Jerusalem, and to arrange a meeting with the Patriarch or one of the other Bishops. Visiting schools, Bethlehem University or the Seminary in Beit Jala are also good opportunities to meet people and hear from the local Christian youth.

Your itinerary could include charitable services supported by the Church, many of which are based in the Jerusalem and Bethlehem areas. Some of those which have welcomed pilgrimage groups in the past include St Martha's House (a day care centre for older women), Ephpheta Paul VI (a school for deaf people), L'Arche Bethlehem, the Holy Family Hospital and Home, and St John's Eye Hospital.

## › Prayer and reflection

It is important for guides and pilgrimage leaders to give suitable time when visiting the holy places for prayer and quiet reflection, as well as a good explanation of the site. Time should also be put aside for prayer and reflection as a group at the end of each day.

## › Security

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land are very safe and rarely encounter problems. However, this can be a tense environment. Guides and pilgrimage companies will be conscious of security concerns, and groups must always respect their advice.







## ➤ Further Information

More information on pilgrimages and the Holy Land can be found using these links:

**Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem**

[lpj.org](http://lpj.org)

**Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land**

[custodia.org](http://custodia.org)

**Friends of the Holy Land**

[friendsoftheholylan.org.uk](http://friendsoftheholylan.org.uk)

**Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem**

*Lieutenancy of England and Wales*

[eohsj.org.uk](http://eohsj.org.uk)

**Pro Terra Sancta UK**

[proterrasancta.org.uk](http://proterrasancta.org.uk)

**The Holy Land Coordination**

[theholylan.org.uk](http://theholylan.org.uk)

**CAFOD**

[cafod.org.uk](http://cafod.org.uk)