Friends of Sabeel North America
PO Box 9186 Portland, OR 97207

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center
PO Box 49084, Jerusalem, 91491, Palestine

March 5, 2014

Your Holiness Pope Francis:

We join with Christians and people of other faiths around the world working for peace and justice in the Holy Land. Your Holiness is much aware of the root causes of conflict and injustice in the Holy Land: Israel's occupation and denial of human rights to the Palestinian people.

As you prepare for your upcoming trip to the Holy Land, we would like to especially bring the suffering of Palestinian children to your Holiness' attention. *UNICEF* recently published a report (*Children in Israeli Military Detention*) focusing on the treatment of hundreds of Palestinian children prosecuted in Israeli military courts each year. Based on over 400 sworn testimonies, *UNICEF* concluded that the "ill-treatment of children who come in contact with the system appears to be widespread, systematic and institutionalized throughout the process." The treatment documented by *UNICEF* includes terrifying nighttime arrests, blindfolding and shackling, and the routine physical and mental abuse of children as young as 12 years old. *UNICEF* concluded that: "in no other country are children systematically tried by juvenile military courts that, by definition, fall short of providing the necessary guarantees to ensure respect for their rights."

The concerns raised by *UNICEF* are not new and have been documented over many years by Israeli, Palestinian and international lawyers, as well as by other United Nations agencies and NGOs, including the *U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child*, the *U.N. Committee against Torture, Military Court Watch, B'Tselem,* the *Public Committee Against Torture, Defence for Children International Palestine* and *Save the Children.*

We ask your Holiness to publicly call upon the government of Israel to end its mistreatment of Palestinian children; to respect the rights of refugees to return under international law, recognized by the Vatican; to end the prolonged military occupation of the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; and to end the punitive and illegal siege and blockade of Gaza. Of the 1.8 million people living in Gaza, 51% are under 18 years old and 43% are under 15 years old.

We also ask your Holiness to publicly call upon all nations to address policies toward Israel that have allowed the abuses of occupation and colonization to fester for so many decades, and to call upon those nations to demand justice, accountability and the implementation of international law.

As we pray, we examine our own lives for how individually and collectively we can best contribute to ending the suffering of children in Palestine and of all children of the world.

We reflect on the beautiful passage in Isaiah 61 that Jesus used to proclaim his ministry: "*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those that are bound."* We join our prayers with those of the Church and people of faith everywhere in our ongoing work for the peace that will only come with justice in the Holy Land.

Sincerely,

The Reverend Dr. Naim Ateek, Anglican Church, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem, Palestine
The Reverend Dr. Don Wagner, Presbyterian Church (USA), Friends of Sabeel-North America, Chicago, Illinois
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Note: Where individual's names are listed first, the denomination, church, or organizations are for identification only. Where organizational names are listed first, the organization is a signatory.