

Why Rev. Elias Chacour Was Selected for the 18th Niwano Peace Prize

The Niwano Peace Foundation (Nichiko Niwano, president; Motoyuki Naganuma, chairman) decided to award the 18th Niwano Peace Prize to an ordained Palestinian Christian priest and educator, Rev. Abuna Elias Chacour of Israel. Sixty-one-year-old Rev. Chacour is a Melkite Catholic priest and the president of Mar Elias Educational Institutions. Some 1,000 experts in 125 countries were asked to nominate candidates for the prize. All the nominees were then rigorously screened by a committee comprising seven representatives from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions.

Rev. Chacour has dedicated himself totally over the last thirty-plus years to efforts for reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. In particular, Mar Elias Educational Institutions which Rev. Chacour established has been serving as a site for developing mutual understanding between youths of different religions and ethnic backgrounds. Many gifted students have graduated from the institutions imbued with a love of peace and justice. Rev. Chacour's educational undertaking to realize peace in society has drawn the attention of other religionists. He is a person who is able to shine a guiding light on the difficult problem of Israel's relations with the Palestinians.

In 1939, Rev. Chacour was born in the village of Biram in the Upper Galilee in Arab Palestine to a Palestinian Christian family, members of the Melkite Catholic church. At the age of eight, he experienced the tragedy of his people when his family was evicted by the arrival of Jewish immigrants and became refugees in their homeland. His parents were hired by newly arrived Jewish immigrants to pick the figs and olives in their orchards in return for food. He remembers seeing his parents cry many times a day.

People who have experienced persecution can become embittered and often resign themselves to a course of violent revenge. But that was not the path that Rev. Chacour chose. The Jews themselves had been the victims of terrible persecution by Nazi Germany. Instead of meeting violence with violence, he chose the course of action to break the cycle of violence, suspicion, and brutal hatred. In cooperation with Jewish friends, Rev. Chacour organized a march comprising Jews and Arabs to protest the Israeli authorities' violent oppression of Palestinian refugees. The march participants consequently were persecuted by the authorities.

Rev. Chacour was ordained a Melkite Catholic priest in 1965 in Nazareth. Firmly believing that the improvement of society must begin with mutual learning, he opened a school in Ibillin in Lower Galilee that started with 80 students. This was the origin of the present Mar Elias Educational Institutions. The road to establishing the secondary school was a thorny one, however. It was particularly difficult to obtain a building permit from the Israeli authorities. Yet he has never faltered in his faith. As he wrote in his book, *We Belong to the Land*: "The perseverance of small, powerless drops of water dripping on the same rock, in the same place, ends by breaking the rock. In the same way, the power of faith with perseverance can break the walls of hatred, of rejection, and of violent injustice." He persevered in dedication and prayer for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Palestinians in Israel until finally he was able to obtain the building permit. Educational undertakings to promote reconciliation and coexistence have been tried in many parts of the world. But against the backdrop of Israel's social conditions at the time, the courageous efforts of Rev. Chacour-himself a Palestinian-must be a source of hope and inspiration for the many who share his ideals. The school has continued to grow through the establishment of, among others, a kindergarten, an elementary school, a Technological College, a Regional Teachers Center, and

Center for Religious Pluralism. At present, Mar Elias Educational Institutions have a combined enrollment of more than 4,000 students from throughout Israel.

The Mar Elias Educational Institutions are open to all Israelis regardless of religious background. They are envisaged as becoming a kind of oasis within Israel, where young people-whether Christians, Jews, or Muslims-can join with one another to work together to create a common future. The institutions provide a meeting ground for practical training toward peaceful coexistence based on religious pluralism and dialogue.

The relationship between Israel and the Palestinian autonomous government continues to be confrontational and divisive. The successful route to peaceful reconciliation has yet to be found. That is why Rev. Chacour has said:

"International agreements, the signing of peace treaties between governments and heads of states, have proved to be shaky, superficial, and easily damaged. At heart, they lack roots. They are only signatures on pieces of paper. Through the Mar Elias Educational Institutions we want to reach agreement in the hearts of the younger generation, the leaders of tomorrow. These roots planted in the hearts of young Jews, Palestinian Christians, and Muslims cannot be easily destroyed."

Rev. Chacour's dedication to coexistence in the truest sense has been highly acclaimed worldwide. In 1994 he received the prestigious World Methodist Peace Award that previously has been presented to former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, the late Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. One of his books, *Blood Brothers*, has been translated into 28 languages and provides guiding principles for people around the world.

True peace cannot be achieved unless peace is established in the human mind. In awarding the 18th Niwano Peace Prize to Rev. Abuna Elias Chacour, the Niwano Peace Foundation wishes to express its great esteem for his dedication to peace through the means of education. We commend Rev. Chacour's significant achievements to date and pray that numerous others will be inspired to follow in his footsteps.