

# Franciscan Holy Land official is confident about movement toward peace

JERUSALEM - Although a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians may not be reached in 2010, Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, said he believed there would be movement in that direction.

"Peace will take a longer time; peace is a process, it is not just an agreement but also education, and this will take time. But something should happen (in 2010) - at least a little step toward peace," he told Catholic News Service after the annual New Year's reception for Christian communities hosted by Israeli President Shimon Peres Dec. 28.

At the reception, Peres told the Christian leaders that both Palestinians and Israelis have come to a "wide and deep" realization that they have no other alternative but to make peace with each other.

"We'd like to come to a peace agreement with the Palestinians based on two states for two peoples, side by side, in mutual respect," said Peres, noting that Israel was also ready to begin negotiations with neighboring Syria and Lebanon.

"There must be a better future," he told the religious leaders, who also included Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem, Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour of Haifa, Israel, and leaders of the Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Ethiopian and Armenian churches.

Peres said religious leaders have an important role in making sure that their places of worship do not fall prey to fundamentalist forces that preach against the followers of different religions.

Speaking in the name of all the church leaders, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III said the role of religious leaders was "crucial and fundamental," not in

taking over the positions of the politicians but in assuring that political leaders are “shaped by the moral traditions of the religious faith.”

“Our obligation as religious leaders is to lay the foundations to the political problem,” he said.

Clergy especially, he said, must influence their congregations to exercise “responsible citizenship,” emphasize the “symbiotic relationship” among the religions and take a strong position against any violence.