

# **In messages, Holy Land church leaders call for peace, reconciliation**

JERUSALEM - Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal's first Christmas message as patriarch of Jerusalem was one of hope and encouragement, without ignoring the Holy Land's difficulties.

"Christmas has come and so we are full of hope. We are thankful for hopeful signs around us, such as recent international encounters at the highest levels among religious leaders and among other peacemakers," Patriarch Twal said in his Dec. 23 message.

He told journalists at a press conference that after his first six months as patriarch he felt "fine" in the "most beautiful and most complicated diocese in the world."

"There are many problems, yet at the same time I do not feel alone in this mission. It will be OK," he added.

In his message, he said hope did not prevent the daily sadness from the "instability, insecurity, the unclear vision for the future and not least the aggression against citizens and their land and property."

The patriarch called Iraq "the second tragedy" which could not be ignored. Iraq's population, culture, heritage and history have been undermined "because of its occupation by foreign military forces."

"It is our wish that all Iraqi citizens should be able to remain in their homeland," he said. "We pray for the unity of Iraq and for its return to normal life."

The patriarch also confirmed that a papal pastoral visit to the Holy Land will take place in May.

In a separate Christmas message Dec. 18, Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa,

head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, addressed the world financial crisis.

“The torments that today most brutally afflict society are of an economic nature. Materialistic society discovers with dismay its deepest fragility. Being poor or becoming poor becomes a real possibility for everyone,” he said. “But this is only the outward sign of a deeper poverty that afflicts the soul. We too discover that we are shepherds in the night.”

“This year more than ever we are certain that we will not be alone in seeking the child,” he added.

In a separate Dec. 22 Christmas message, the patriarchs and heads of churches in the Holy Land urged believers to stand alongside those who suffer.

They said they prayed that U.S. President-elect Barack Obama and other world leaders would see the “urgent need for peace in the Middle East.”