

U.S. bishop says he admires Palestinians' spirit

JERUSALEM (CNS) — The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said he “admired the spirit of the (Palestinian) people” in the face of hardships in the Gaza Strip.

Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., said he was “really impressed” by the vision of Msgr. Manuel Musallam of Holy Family Parish in Gaza. His vision is to build “a sense of unity for all people in the Holy Land including Muslims, Christians and Jews” despite the difficult conditions in which the parishioners live, the bishop said.

“It was a very positive message,” he told Catholic News Service in a Jan. 16 telephone interview from Nazareth, Israel. “With all the hardships they are facing, there is still a sense of hope ... a vision for the future and a commitment to the education,” so the children can learn what they can become and “what the area can become.”

Bishop Skylstad visited Israel and the Palestinian territories Jan. 11-18 as a participant in the Coordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church of the Holy Land and the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. He and 21 other American and European bishops traveled to the Gaza Strip Jan. 13 and visited Catholic parishes and religious leaders in northern Israel Jan. 14-16.

Israeli travel restrictions and border closings have impeded farmers in Gaza from moving their produce to outside markets from an area that used to be a major exporter of oranges, he said, noting that is just one of many difficulties they face.

Although Bishop Skylstad acknowledged there have been conflicts between Muslims and Christians, he said the Christian Palestinians he met in Gaza resented the perception of a “deep separation” between the two religions. And, he noted, Muslim religious leaders took part in a lunch in the bishops’ honor.

Though the infighting between the Hamas and Fatah movements was not mentioned during their visit, Bishop Skylstad said Msgr. Musallam told him violence is

facilitated by a weak government and the lack of a strong police force, which allows fanatical elements of the movements to run freely.

The bishops also spent three days visiting Catholic parishes in northern Israel, where they met with local leaders, priests and parishioners.

Bishop Skystad said the vision of Melkite Archbishop Emile Shoufani of Nazareth was to help the different religious communities know and respect one another.

“You really find, here especially in Nazareth where we celebrated a Melkite-rite Mass, that people just sang up a storm. You kind of wish we could get parishes in the United States to sing like that,” he said.

The economic situation of the Israeli parishes is “much more positive” than those in the Palestinian territories, he said, noting that tourism was more noticeable in Nazareth than in the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

“Though financial support is always an issue, you don’t see the desperate need you see in other places. ... You don’t feel the urgent need like in Gaza or the Dehiyshe refugee camp,” he said.

The bishops met with Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres Jan. 17 in Jerusalem, then met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah, West Bank, where a public Mass and reception were held.

“This has been a learning experience seeing how people live in challenging (circumstances), facing difficulties. It has been very enriching and humbling,” said Bishop Skystad.

The bishops also took part in the third “Journey to Bethlehem” organized by the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in the Holy Land and the United States. As part of the journey, approximately 800 Christian children from the West Bank and Israel took part in a parade through Bethlehem, concluding with an ecumenical service at the Church of the Nativity.

Archbishop Patrick Kelly of Liverpool, England, who led a delegation of British bishops, said all the bishops’ participation aimed to demonstrate their commitment

with the church in the Holy Land.

"I think that we all believe the church will be much poorer if, for instance, we had no people who spoke Aramaic, the language of Christ. They bring it all to life," he said.

"The first Christmas began here in extraordinary political circumstances under Roman occupation, yet the light shone through. As Pope Paul VI said, 'If you want peace, work for justice.' This is why we are here today," Archbishop Kelly told the children following the ecumenical service.

Auxiliary Bishop William Kenney of Birmingham, England, said: "Peace begins with children. They are the future. Today Bethlehem feels exactly as it was 2,000 years ago.

"The city was under occupation, and Christ was born here because of the occupation," he said. "This is a very important occasion, because it reminds us that children are the same everywhere, and they should be allowed to be the same."