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Breaking: US Denies Visas to Two Bethlehem Pastors Ahead of Washington Conference

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"Not in Christ's Name"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

The US State Department has denied visas to two Palestinian Christian leaders from Bethlehem, Fr. Issa Thaljieh of the Church of the Nativity and Rev. Munther Isaac of Christmas Lutheran Church, ahead of Christian conferences in Washington and Atlanta. Thaljieh was due to address the "Not in Christ's Name" conference in Washington today, Saturday 14 November, and his chair at the gathering will now sit empty.

Picture the scene in Washington this morning. Christian leaders from across America are gathering to talk about faith, peace, and the suffering of Christians in the Holy Land. The man who serves at the very church built over the place where Jesus was born was supposed to be among them.

He is not there. He is still in Bethlehem, because his own government would not let him board a plane.

Fr. Thaljieh, the Greek Orthodox parish priest at the Church of the Nativity, was denied his visa for alleged "security reasons". He was also due to speak at a Christian gathering near the US Capitol on Monday 16 November. Both invitations are now in doubt, and so is the reason given for keeping him out.

Thaljieh says his embassy interview repeatedly emphasised his Palestinian identity, and he believes that was the main reason for the denial. "Throughout the interview, considerable emphasis was placed on the fact that I am Palestinian, and I felt that this was the main factor behind the decision to deny my visa," he said.

He did not claim to know the mind of the officer who interviewed him. He simply described what he heard in the room.

His sister, Honey Thaljieh, did receive a US visa, and she is expected to speak on his behalf at the Washington conference. She will carry her brother's words to an audience he cannot reach. It is a generous act, and it is also a measure of how strange this situation has become: a priest of the Church of the Nativity, speaking to America through his sister, because America would not let him speak for himself.

The second denial landed a week earlier, and it hit a pastor who has visited the United States many times before. Rev. Munther Isaac, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, was denied a US visa last week. He was to attend the Church at the Crossroads conference, held 5-7 November in Atlanta.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

READ THE FULL STORY

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