



Fr. Pizzaballa congratulates a resident at the dedication of the new phase of the Child Jesus Housing Project.

Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, OFM, is the major superior of the Franciscan Custody in the Holy Land. As Custos of the Holy Land, he is in charge of over 330 Franciscan friars ministering and working in six Middle East countries: Israel/Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, and Rhodes. The Franciscan Custody maintains over 74 sanctuaries, 16 schools, and 29 parishes throughout these countries. He is presently the Chairman of FFHL.

### **1. Can you give our readers some thought on the Franciscan charisma and how this charisma is being reflected in the ministry of the friars here in the Holy Land?**

The principal charisma of the Franciscans is to live in the Incarnation of Jesus. We all know that St. Francis of Assisi, in his love for Jesus, wanted to identify himself so completely with Jesus in both a spiritual and physical bond that he eventually became one with Christ. Our Franciscan friars should attempt to at least emulate St. Francis in the same way. Through the Incarnation, Christ took on our human form and lived among us here in the Holy Land. We friars who minister in this land have been given an example. Through His Incarnation, we have become witnesses for Him in the very place, in the various Holy Sites of Christendom which Christ made holy. It is by assisting and helping our fellow men in this land and from these Holy Places that we ourselves become incarnate in Him.

### **2. As Chairman of the Custody's Foundation (FFHL), can you speak about the reasons behind the Christian exodus from the Holy Land and how the Foundation has been successful in stemming it?**

We must remember that Christians have always been a small minority in this land but that the exodus continues. Many have left

and many are planning to leave because of the difficult situations in which they find themselves; that is, because of social, political, economic, and religious concerns. It is also a fact that when there is conflict and tension, the minority always suffers.

The Franciscans, through our Foundation, have been attempting to stem this exodus of our people by first educating them so as to know that they are part and parcel of this land and then to provide them with the necessary economic and material support such as scholarship grants, job opportunities and housing. It will only be through education that our young people will be able to develop their talents and abilities to become professionals in their various fields while at the same time becoming valued and productive members of their communities.

### **3. How do you look at the Israeli/Palestinian conflict... its causes and possible solutions?**

We cannot talk about the Holy Land without talking about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is a very sad and difficult reality that affects everyone in this country.

As a religious, I don't think this is a time to get into a lengthy and comprehensive political discussion of the conflict, but I can generally say that the causes for this conflict come down to two aspects: there is a reciprocal mistrust and fear about each other and there is a lack of prospects and vision for the future from each side.

It's important for us as religious to instill and to talk about these prospects. If the politicians from both sides wish to have their country flourish in peace and goodwill, then they must have a more realistic vision for the future. We also, as religious leaders, must maintain a strong voice, not only to assist all the people of the land, but more importantly, to use our moral authority to speak to the politicians on both sides. They must become "builders" and not "spoilers". We need to ask God for more enlightened individuals to resolve this conflict in a peaceful manner.

### **4. Would you speak about the Fundamental Agreement that was signed in 1993 between the Holy See and the Israeli government ... what it was and the difficulties that this agreement is now facing? Recently, the Israeli government sent an invitation to His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI to visit the Holy Land in 2007. Do you think that the Holy Father would still consider coming to the Holy Land in spite of the lack of progress on the agreement?**

An agreement was signed between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1996 to establish full diplomatic relations between the two entities. Of the two commissions, which were established to discuss the details of the agreement, one has been meeting for the last ten years on the status and life of the local Church in Israel and more specifically in areas of taxation and juridical status.

There seemed to have been some major misunderstandings in the past in these two areas, but the meetings are "back on track" and we are hopefully looking for some closure in these areas.

The Church has always been patient with issues that some find

controversial and although our present Holy Father is very interested in seeing this Fundamental Agreement being concluded. The recent invitation to visit Israel next year could be looked upon as a positive move on the part of the Israeli government and as a sign that they are ready to reach an agreement.

**5. Can you speak about some of the future projects that the Franciscan Custody is interested in implementing in the Holy Land?**

There are many projects that are “on the books” that the Custody is interested in implementing, but one that has been approved is to have a multi-media museum center in Capernaum in Galilee, the place where St. Peter and some of the apostles were called to follow Jesus. The Holy Site of St. Peter’s house and its surrounding 4<sup>th</sup> century synagogue are of great interest but more is needed to further explain the significance of these spiritual and historic sites.

Another project that we are looking at is to help young people who are “chemically dependent” by finding them a place in the Holy Land where they can reside and work while at the same time receive the needed medical and psychological assistance they need. We are still studying this proposal.

Lastly, we are looking at assisting our Christian families living in Galilee with housing accommodations as we have been doing for our families in Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

**6. As Chairman of FFHL as well as Custos of the Holy Land, would you like to leave some parting words to the many Catholics and Christian believers in the U.S. who support the work and ministry of the Custody?**

As Custos of the Holy Land, I do quite a bit of traveling around the world and I have to say that it has been the Catholics and fellow Christians of the great United States who have been the most generous in helping the Christians as well as the Custody in the Holy Land. Their donations and funding provide for more than 70% of our financial resources and for this we are most grateful. I cannot thank them enough.

This exceptional support as well as interest from the American Church in the Holy Land is a gift from God and I hope this collaboration and love will continue to blossom. I would especially like to thank all those who support the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land in helping us to preserve and to maintain the Christian presence in the Holy Land. It is a cause that none of us should ever forget.

## EWTN: Humanitarian Organizations Partner with FFHL



*Fr. Peter, Mr. Ronny Levy, President of MADP-TARSHISH, appear with Mr. Raymond Arroyo, talk show host for the “World Over”.*

PAVE THE WAY FOUNDATION is an organization founded by Mr. Gary Krupp, a native New Yorker, which is attempting to bridge the gap between religions through cultural, technological, and intellectual exchanges as well as paving the way towards global cooperation, mutual respect and education. Mr. Krupp has been of great assistance in promoting better understanding between the peoples of the Holy Land and has greatly assisted the Franciscan Custody.

During the program, all three individuals discussed the conflict in the Holy Land as well as how their respective organizations are attempting to promote peace and goodwill among Jews, Christians and Muslims through dialogue and humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Ronny Levy, President of MADP-TARSHISH and Mr. Gary Krupp, President of PAVE THE WAY FOUNDATION appeared together with Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM on EWTN’s *The World Over* with Raymond Arroyo. It was a unique program since both organizations are headed up by those of the Jewish faith and both organizations are working in partnership with the Franciscan Foundation and the Franciscan Custody respectively.

The MADP-TARSHISH was founded in Jerusalem in 1999 by two Israeli born individuals: Mr. Ronny Levy and Mr. Avi Shemesh. Their foundation was established to provide humanitarian and social aid to all those who are in need irregardless of religion. Several years ago, MADP-TARSHISH partnered with FFHL to promote goodwill in a land that has been traumatized by conflict and violence. Both organizations have jointly sponsored humanitarian programs in the Holy Land.



*Fr. Peter, Mr. Gary Krupp, President of PAVE THE WAY FOUNDATION and Raymond Arroyo.*