

Holy Land Christians in Profile

Sister Maria Grech



Sister Maria Grech comes from Malta which is situated in the heart of the Mediterranean. She is a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and has been working in Israel for the last 28 years. She spent 10 years in Galilee and the last 18 years in Bethlehem. In her latter mission, she concentrated firmly on promoting assistance to families in need, to women wishing to

chart a future for themselves and for the last 5 years, worked hard to set up, organize and run a Family Counseling Center.

You are the Director of the Franciscan Family Center. What does the Center offer to the people of Bethlehem?

For the last 5 years, thanks to the constant and generous support of the FFHL which undertook to sponsor the expenses of the whole project, I have been personally responsible for the management of the Franciscan Family Center. I am glad to note that throughout these five years, many families have made good use of the Center, a constantly growing number are resorting to its counseling services and it is becoming evident that the reason behind such interest is the fact that at the Center, these families find solace, understanding and genuine support. Here, their grievances are listened to with care and this fills them with comfort and hope.

What is the Franciscan Boys' Home in Bethlehem and what is your relationship with it?

Once again thanks to the generous help of the FFHL, last year we were able to inaugurate a 'Franciscan Boys Home.' It provides shelter and care for 30 young boys, whose ages vary between 6 to 14 years, who come from problem-stricken families and who therefore require special attention and care. The overall change witnessed in each of these boys at the end of the year was overwhelming and encouraging. Improvement was not only manifest in their scholastic achievements, but also in their overall rapport with their respective families. Moreover, the positive spillover effect taking place even within the members of their own families, was also noticeable and welcome.

In what other ways do you help the children in Bethlehem?

We have also introduced the *Child Sponsorship Program* for our children in Bethlehem. Government schools in Bethlehem run a Muslim-based curriculum so it has been our wish to provide our Christian children with a Christian-based educational curriculum in religious schools. Unfortunately, not all families are able to afford this. For this purpose, we are trying to provide these poor families with the opportunity to receive a Christian-based education in religious schools —most of which are the Terra Santa Schools run by the Franciscans here in Bethlehem. Needless to say, this requires constant outside financial support, in the absence of which, this endeavor becomes unsustainable.

What do you see as the major reason our young Catholics are emigrating to other countries?

It is becoming all too apparent that the Church is facing a very difficult situation as many people are emigrating and others are in the process of doing so. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, given the dire economic situation prevalent in the region, households are unable to find permanent employment. Another reason contributing to this crisis is the high wall that has been built all around Bethlehem, denying families their freedom of movement to exit and return to Bethlehem, unhindered.

Why should Christians make a pilgrimage to the Holy and what impact do these pilgrimages have on the people living there?

Pilgrimages constitute an important lifeline both for religious and financial reasons. To begin with, I believe that pilgrimages enable visitors to better understand what lies at the heart of our religion which was founded on these very rocks and pathways all over the Holy Land. To this end, pilgrimages engage believers to renew their faith and rekindle their innermost desires to revisit and come closer still to the soul of what they believe in. Pilgrimages visiting the holy shrines are a continuous exercise in faith renewals, in returning to the original spark that charged the early 'household faiths' with the blessing of Christianity. In addition, they provide a great deal of people in the Holy Land with a much needed source of living. In spending a night or two in Bethlehem, they would be indirectly injecting a further ray of hope for those that wish to remain in the Holy Land, but may be unable to do so for long unless their livelihood is secured.

