



FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION

FOR THE HOLY LAND

Bethlehem Child Given Second Chance



In a recent meeting, Fr. Amjad Sabarra, OFM, pastor of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, met a distraught parent whose little boy contracted Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia as well as signs of Turmor Lysis Syndrome. Fr. Amjad turned to the Franciscan Foundation for help. In response, the President of the Foundation, Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM, visited with the father. His little boy's name is Saba and he is 5 ½ years old. He had to be transported to the hospital in Jordan the next day for a much needed treatment which cost \$5,000. His father had already used up whatever insurance money he had. The Foundation sent a check immediately for that amount to the Tafish family. A special letter of thanks from the father follows:

To Our Respected Franciscan Fathers in the Holy Land,

I would like to open this letter first by extending to your grace our sincere and warm wishes for a happy and prosperous 2003.

On behalf of myself, my wife, and all Tafish family members in Bethlehem, we extend our sincere thanks and gratitude for the real financial assistance we received from you to save the life of our son, Saba Adel Tafish, who was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. Your urgent help arrived right on time. We are so grateful and indebted to you. In fact, we cannot express to you in simple words how grateful we are for this assistance or our delight and pleasure for the most valuable gift of God we ever received on Christmas and the New Year. You deserve a special thank you.

The Franciscan Foundation is providing urgent help to the needy Christians in the Holy Land. You are a true symbol and a role model for humanitarian causes. Suffice it to say that all your benevolence and the help the Christians in the Holy Land receive are outstanding and very reputable.

Our Lord, the Saviour, will reward you for all your charitable acts. May God bless all of you and give you strength, health, power and success towards achieving your humanitarian goals.

Sincerely,
Adel Tafish & Family



*(Above left) Adel Tafish, father of the young sick boy
(Above) Saba Tafish rests in the hospital after his treatment.*

OUR MISSION

THE FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION FOR THE HOLY LAND IS A WORLDWIDE ORGANIZATION FOUNDED IN 1994 UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE FRANCISCAN CUSTODY OF THE HOLY LAND. THE FOUNDATION WAS CREATED TO SAFEGUARD THE BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND CONTINUED PRESENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN PALESTINIAN MINORITY LIVING IN THE HOLY LAND BY PROVIDING ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIPS, SUBSIDIZED HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, WHILE PRESERVING, PROTECTING, AND RESTORING THE HOLY SITES OF CHRISTIANITY. FOR THESE CHRISTIANS TRAPPED IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT OF ETHNIC DISTRUST, THE FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION FOR THE HOLY LAND HAS BECOME THEIR PRIMARY ORGANIZED VOICE.

LETTER FROM THE CUSTOS

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Pax et bonum!

This Easter season has presented us challenging times and the words of St. Paul echoes in my mind.



"We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope. And this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Romans 5: 3-5.

Although as Christians in the Holy Land we feel crushed at times, we never lose the Hope that Christ has promised us.

As my Brothers and Sisters in the United States, you continue to lighten our burdens by your financial and prayerful support. We turn to you as our Christian family and thank you for all that you have provided for us through the grace of God... with the Hope that you will continue. We need you!

Let us together lift our hearts and prayers to the Sacrosanct Trinity in thanksgiving for each other.

In the Spirit of St. Francis,

I remain a servant of God and yours,

Fr. Giovanni Battistelli, OFM

Chairman

Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? Niveen Rofa – Scholarship Student

Twenty-two year old Niveen still lives at home with her parents in the old city of Jerusalem, just a short walk from the Franciscan monastery. Until her older brother and 3 sisters left home to get married, she grew up in an overcrowded household with only two bedrooms, a kitchen and bath. Although much more comfortable now, she cannot have a place of her own until she also becomes married.

As Niveen grew up in Jerusalem, she attended both grade and high school under the Franciscans. Niveen was later awarded a scholarship grant to attend Hadassah College, a well known Israeli educational institution. In preparation for attending this college she spent a year learning the Hebrew language. As Niveen said, "It was difficult at first but after spending long hours of study, I was able to finally comprehend the language." Niveen managed to maintain a "B+" average in her studies. After graduation, she applied for her license to become a medical lab technician which will eventually qualify her to work in a clinic or research center.



Niveen Rofa, graduated scholarship student

In addition to taking six to eight courses each semester, Niveen worked on Saturday to earn a little extra money for herself and her family. Someday she hopes to be married and have a family of her own, but for now she wants to work in the medical field. When asked how she felt about going to school she replied, "It is a good feeling to know that someone, that is, the Franciscan Foundation assisted me with my college education."

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Bethlehem Appeal Continues to Bring Hope and Joy

As mentioned in our last newsletter, the FFHL's 'Bethlehem Appeal' has been assisting the Christians in Bethlehem with the restoration of houses and apartments, providing food supplies, and even purchasing transportation vehicles that were destroyed by the military incursions. We are proud to announce that the FFHL continues on in its mission to help the beleaguered Christians of Bethlehem. Below are some of the stories where your charity is making a difference.

Dabdoud Family

Mr. and Mrs. Dabdoud, one of the more marginalized Catholic families in Bethlehem, have been living in sub-standard conditions in their home for the last 15 years. The family came to the attention of the Foundation through Sr. Rose Messa, a nun from the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist who works in Bethlehem.

Mr. Dabdoud is not able to work and his wife remains at home. Limited financial assistance is given by their respective families. They have four children – Marino (19), Mezar (17), Fadi (16) and Feros (12).



The house was in many ways unlivable, with open running pipes, broken solar panels and hot water heaters. In addition, kitchen and bathroom facilities were primitive. They needed new doors, walls, and flooring as well as furniture. The Foundation completely renovated the home at a cost of \$11,000. After the renovations, Mrs. Dabdoud said, "This is a miracle from heaven. Before the Foundation came, it was very difficult to live like we did and now everything is so new. We thank those people who helped you to help us. Please tell them that they gave us 'new life'. My family will never forget what you did for us especially when we were in need."



Before and after pictures of the kitchen and bathroom facilities in the Dabdoud family home.

(Continued on back cover)

Pilgrimages Benefit the Work of the Franciscan Foundation

Join us on a pilgrimage of faith to the Holy Land or Turkey and Greece "in the footsteps of St. Paul." Discover the ancient holy sites where Our Lord walked and preached or where St. Paul proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ.

- September 16-28, 2003 – Turkey/Greece with Fr. Pat McCloskey, OFM, Editor of St. Anthony Messenger Magazine
- November 14-24, 2003 – Holy Land with Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM, President of the FFHL
- February 2-13, 2004 – Holy Land with Fr. Tim Kroeger. Guided by Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM

These pilgrimages exploring the Holy Land and Paul's Epistles will provide an opportunity to open a new chapter in your own faith journey and your own response to God's generous grace. **Now is the time to reach out in support of our Palestinian Christians. Your presence can make a difference.**

For information or to receive a brochure call toll free (866) 905-3787

FRANCISCANS CREATE NEW JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN BETHLEHEM

In the FFHL's quest to assist the Christians in the Holy Land many needs have come to the forefront, especially the needs of the Christians in Bethlehem. It was for this reason that the Foundation made the 'Bethlehem Appeal' to our readers some 7 months ago.

restore and to rebuild our rather large parish cemetery. We are hoping to expand this number as soon as new projects are created and although the majority of the work is temporary, it is giving needed revenue for them and their families.

Criteria for Selection

1. Individuals who have lost total employment
2. Individuals who are supporting large families
3. Married men who are renting a house
4. Married men who have children in school
5. Individuals who have certain skills or experience to fulfill the particular project.



Fr. Amjad Sabarra, OFM, looks on as workers repair parish cemetery.

There is a saying, "God helps those who help themselves." And although we will continue to assist and give humanitarian aid and support to our Christians, we have also decided to begin a pilot program called **PROJECT HOPE**. This program will create job opportunities for the young people of Bethlehem and more specifically, for the young parishioners of St. Catherine Church. At present there are only 10,000 Christians residing in Bethlehem, 4,000 of which are Roman Catholic. One half of those are between the ages of 18-21 years old.

Through Project Hope, the FFHL has already hired some 15 to 30 young employees to clean, to



*(Top) Workers for Project Hope clean and repair parking area for youth hostel.
(Bottom) Workers paint fences at Social Center compound.*

FFHL Shares in Community Celebration

Below is a reflection by Fr. Amjad Sabbara, OFM
Pastor of St. Catherine Parish and Church of the Nativity in
Bethlehem.

It was Christmas and the situation in Bethlehem could not have been worse! Closures, unemployment, and curfews created an economic crisis unprecedented for the birthplace of the Christ. For this very reason, the work of the Catholic Action Club became even more important than usual. Normally, because of its location and available facilities, the Club provides an array of social, cultural, pastoral, and educational services within a holistic community setting. But with the many negative circumstances surrounding our Christian families, the Club needed to help them to think and act positively.

The Club planned a Christmas program for the whole family - adults, teenagers, and children to include theater, dance, choirs, music, as well as other recreational activities that would highlight the values and meaning of the season, particularly in Bethlehem. "Christmas - a Spirit of Love" was the program planned if conditions allowed. It would take place over three days at



the Catholic Action Club main hall, and theater complex. To the amazement of everyone, the curfew was lifted a day before Christmas and the day following and we were able to modify the program accordingly.

Even though the program was announced only a day before at the church, close to 500 families were at the gates of the Catholic Action Club. More than 1600 children between the ages of 3-11 registered that day.

With the huge turnout of people, all the facilities at the Club were used: the cinema hall, the ceremonial hall, the youth hall,

the nursery and even the outside court. Volunteers were running all over to ensure that the families were seated, that all children who were registered would receive a gift, food, and cookies.

A special thanks to our partner and sponsor, the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land, which contributed \$3000 to this "extravaganza celebration". The program was organized in cooperation with the youth attending the Franciscan Terra Sancta School, their scouts, and representatives from the different volunteer committees at the Catholic Action Club.



Families celebrate together at the Christmas program at the Catholic Action Center.

Children and their accompanying families were invited to the program held at each of the different facilities according to age. The programs included chanting, choirs, plays and games. **It was joyful!**

The children were eager for the grand finale - the toys and the wrappings. Each child who registered received a gift according to his age group and some went home with more than one.

In total, 1600 gifts were distributed that day. In addition, some others were presented during the Christmas games and programs. These games included religious contests, quizzes, and even some sporting competitions.

The program, the activities, the gifts, the Christmas decorations, the pies and cakes, were all planned and arranged by local families. Everyone was delighted with the magnificent traditional cooking. Two different toy shops supplied the gifts, even though they had little time to provide 800 gifts, they were responsive and committed.

Strength From Family Values Gives Hope

Even across miles of sea and land, we as American Christians share a common way of life with the Palestinians. This way of life is rooted in our living faith and the land where Jesus walked in His earthly life. As Christians, it is our faith that dictates our decisions, our relationships, our work, and most importantly it is faith that binds us together in one community through the transcendental love we share in our families.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ!

For those of us that have traveled to the Holy Land and those who have not, what is the one lesson most impressed upon our hearts by our Palestinian brothers and sisters? Would it be that war is not the answer? Would it be that we are called to reach out to those less fortunate? However true these realities are, they are not the answer. Instead, it is the Value of Family. It is the duty of married Christian couples to create a home for their children and to pass on to them tradition and culture, created and guided by faith. This is the reality so beautifully seen through the eyes of Christian families in the Holy Land. Amidst conflict, destruction, and daily struggle, they rise above through their families, to find love and hope in Christ. How much we can learn from our brothers and sisters, we who live in a country that has forgotten the dignity of the family.

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, tells us that, "The family founded on marriage is a patrimony of humanity, a great good of priceless value, necessary for the life, development and the future of peoples". It is from the lofty institution of the family that one gathers strength, knowledge, charity, values, and hope. Hope for the future. This is how our Palestinian brothers and sisters can survive in the face of such despair. It is family that they place as the cornerstone of their lives.

One such family truly living this message in Bethlehem is Anton Aqleh, his wife Helen and their sons, Samuel and Daniel. Regional Representative of Indianapolis for the Foundation, Mr. Mike Hirsch and his wife Kathy, had the opportunity this past January to visit with the Aqleh family. Mrs. Hirsch immediately recognized their family values and had the following to say in reflection, "When we talked with the Palestinian people they were always happy, generous, and kind. They were dignified; they had their practices, their culture, and their ways of passing the hours. They were welcoming people and they knew they were in a very difficult place. Yet the way these people lived and kept their faith is inspirational.



Anton and Helen Aqleh and their sons, Samuel and Daniel, with P.R. Director, Richard Sontag

Helen and Anthony Aqleh, all lived in a long hall, one family room on the left, a room on the right where they all slept, and the kitchen. But they were such Christian people and prayer was so novel, so constant. All

they talked about was prayer, the Bible, and the Christian life."

Another exemplary family, Tony and Audette Abdel Mour, lives in the Old City of Jerusalem. "Family values are ingrained in the life of the Old City," Mr. Hirsch observed. "These people were so family oriented. The kids are obedient; they pay attention. This family has values. That dignity comes from love of the family. In the interview, we asked Tony specifically, 'Why haven't you moved on?' He said, 'I have no reason to go anywhere, this is where I live. My parents lived in this house and still live on the other side of it. When I have work, it is here. The market is here. My kids go to school here (the Franciscan school of Terra Santa). I'm not going anywhere – this is my home!' No matter how bad it might get, this family would never leave."



Tony and Audette Abdel Mour and their sons.

It is the home, both physical and spiritual, created through the faith of this family that keeps them in the land of Christ, to which they feel so connected. "The dignity of their history," as Mrs. Hirsch phrased it, contributes to their feeling of belonging in a time when so many are trying to push them out. "They just want peace and to raise their family."

Another aspect stemming from family is the communion they share within their parish lives. They see the parish as part of their families and it is in this setting that they can find communion and camaraderie centered on the Eucharist. It is in this Body of Christ that we also become truly a part of their families as brothers and sisters. One can find a real connection with Holy Land families here within our similar parish lives. It is the same traditions, the same Mass, and the same heritage that we share. We are One Body in Christ. We all strive to live holy lives as Jesus has taught us.

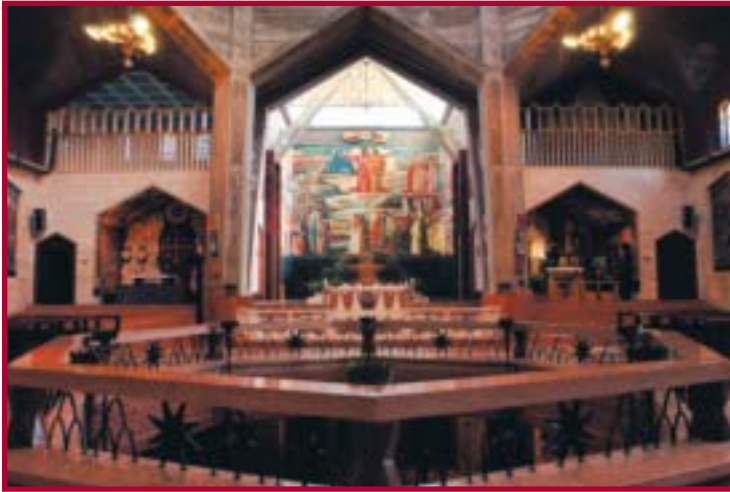
And so let us all do as the Holy Father has asked us: "Dear Christian families, proclaim joyfully to the whole world the wonderful treasure which you, as domestic churches, possess! Christian couples, in your communion of life and love, in your mutual self-giving and in your generous openness to children, become, in Christ, the light of the world. The Lord asks you daily to be like a lamp which does not remain hidden, but is put "on a stand, and . . . gives light to all in the house."

Understanding all these things, the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land have recently dedicated a new housing project, "The Child Jesus", to build homes for Christian families in Bethlehem. This initiative was supported by the generosity of Christians worldwide.

Nazareth Basilica is a Reminder of the Annunciation

by Jim Rygelski, Managing Editor, *St. Louis Review*

"Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.'" (Luke 1:30-31)



WHERE PILGRIMS GATHERED - Shown above is the main-level sanctuary of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. A Franciscan said that before the recent Intifada uprising against the Israeli government the church would have been filled with worshippers attending Mass.

NAZARETH - As life begins at conception, the story of Jesus' earthly life really begins here. Nazareth is a city of more than 70,000, a third of whom are Christian, according to local estimates. But at the time of Christ's birth, it was home to only about 200 Jews, and located several days' journey north of Jerusalem and its nearby hamlet of Bethlehem.

An expansive, three-level church built in 1969 towers over the remains of the tiny stone home in which a virgin named Mary lived with her parents while preparing to wed a local carpenter named Joseph. It was there that the Angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced that she would bear not just a son, but one who would be "great and called the Son of the Most High," as well as one who would "rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke, 1:32-33).

That was certainly a frightening experience for a young woman, perhaps in only her late teens, especially when told that such a birth would be not by man but by the power of "the Holy Spirit" (Luke, 1:35). The virgin birth was the fulfillment of Scripture's prediction found in Isaiah 7:14 ("Therefore the Lord Himself will give you this sign: The virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and shall name him Immanuel, meaning 'God with us.'") Mary's acceptance of that announcement demonstrated the selflessness of God-fearing people who obey His will: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done unto me according to your word" (Luke 1:36).

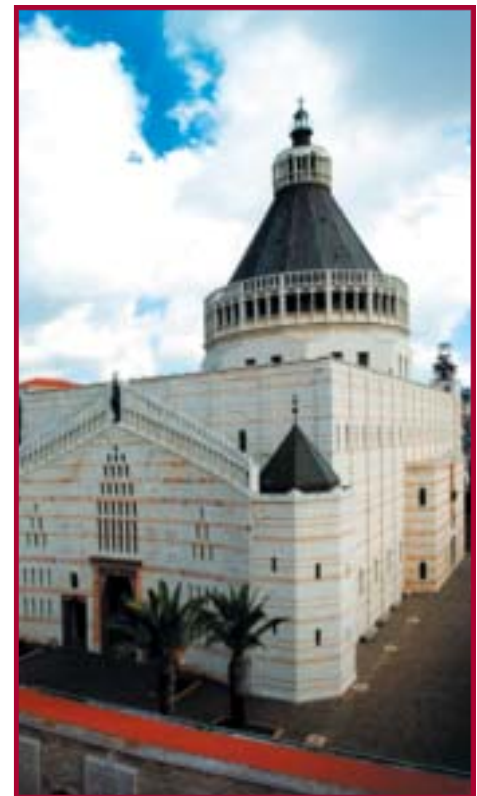
Joseph, her betrothed, also demonstrated his obedience to God at this time. Realizing Mary was pregnant, but not by him, he at first

desired to divorce her quietly. But "the angel of the Lord" appeared to him in a dream and told him that it had been by the Holy Spirit. "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded of him and took his wife into his home." (Matthew 1:24)

The modern Basilica of the Annunciation is the fourth church built on the site of Gabriel's apparition to Mary, going back to the Byzantine era in the fourth century, when Christianity received official state approval. The current church replaced one that dated from the 1700s and which Pope John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council, was determined to replace with something he thought would be more reverent.

He didn't live to see the result of his efforts, but among the many murals in the sanctuary of the main level is one depicting him and the other popes who did what they could to make Nazareth a holy place for Christians. Those many murals also depict scenes from the life of Christ. They include a symbolic depiction of the 120 Franciscans who have been martyred.

The most striking feature of the church is the skylight through its dome. The dome is in the shape of an inverted lily, and it allows a shaft of daylight to stream down through the church and to illuminate the area in front of the altar that was Mary's home. That beam of concentrated light symbolizes "God's intercession coming down on Mary," said Father Peter Vasko, OFM, who has lived in the Holy Land for 18 years and guided many Catholics in their pilgrimage through it. Images of Mary, donated by many nations, are on the walls of the main level of the church. This merely fulfills what she herself said, "...behold, from now on, all ages will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).



Father Vasko said the Basilica of the Annunciation is a particular favorite place of women who travel to the Holy Land. "They identify so closely with Mary; she was a mother, wife. She cleaned and worked like they do," he said.

(Continued from page 3)

Wael Abu Akleh

Wael Abu Akleh, age 39, and a parishioner of St. Catherine's parish, had a heart attack this past January and was paralyzed on the left side of his body. He was brought to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem but was not insured. His family had used their small savings to help pay for the medical expenses. More treatments were needed at the hospital but the medical facility refused until the needed \$1500 was paid in advance. The Franciscan Foundation paid for the additional treatments. As his mother was handed the check and with tears in her eyes she said, "Please, please thank all those people who helped us and my son at this critical moment in our lives."

(Right) Wael recovers at Hadassah Hospital with his family



Antonian Home for the Elderly

The Antonian Home for the Elderly, pictured at the right, began in 1948 by the Catholic parishioners of Bethlehem to meet the needs of the senior community. The home began with 8 patients and today they have 52 senior citizens



Fr. Amjad Sabarra, OFM, visits with residents at the Antonian Home for the Elderly

at the residence. The facility is situated in the center of Bethlehem only a few miles from Nativity Square.



The home has had some financial problems. During the month of January, a very cold month, the administration did not have the necessary funding to heat the facility. The Franciscan Foundation came to their aid and donated \$2000 to make sure that our senior citizens were kept warm.



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