

FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION FOR THE HOLY LAND NEWSLETTER

SPRING #53

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Woman in prayer at the Stone of Anointing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre | CR: Renee Mills

THE MODERN-DAY CHRISTIAN EXODUS AND HOW YOU CAN HELP

The heart of our mission at FFHL is to preserve the presence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Our efforts centralize around safeguarding our Christian brothers and sisters in their homeland by providing access to meaningful employment, safe housing, and life-changing education. We continue seeing the population of Christians in the Middle East dwindling at a rapid pace. It is an extraordinarily large trend that is not being addressed, and the crisis continues to worsen.

“As recent as 1950, around 80% of Bethlehem’s population was Christian. Today, the population of Christians comprise less than 20% of the total Christian population.”

Recently, Fareed Zakaria, Indian-American journalist and host of CNN’s segment “[Fareed Zakaria GPS](#), On GPS: A Christian Exodus,” covered a story about the dwindling population of Christianity in the Middle East. Fareed, along with guest Janine di Giovanni, journalist and author of the book, “The Vanishing: Faith, Loss and the

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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 strengthen and support Christianity in the Holy Land through the preservation of holy Christian sites and the support of the basic human rights and continued presence of the Christian minority living in the Holy Land.

LEARN MORE

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WWW.FFHL.ORG

OR CONTACT US FOR A BROCHURE

EMAIL: INFO@FFHL.ORG

LETTER FROM THE CUSTOS

Rev. Francesco Patton, OFM

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During this Lenten season, let us experience God's great mercy; and in turn, may we demonstrate selfless compassion to others. It is my hope that you have been drawn more closely to our Lord and Savior through prayer and devotion. May God remind us constantly through times of uncertainty that we are Easter people and that the Resurrection of the Lord conquered death and opened the way of life for us!

This Christian hope allows us to confront a world that needs more love and compassion. You have remembered the insurmountable challenges and struggles faced by our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, and I thank you for your faithfulness.

As we prepare to celebrate Easter and reflect upon the great sacrifice our Savior made for us on the cross, let us rejoice and count our numerous blessings from Him. As a community of faith, may we open our hearts to the opportunities that God is providing us to love our dear neighbor during this time. Together we can accomplish many things. For all of you, I give thanks.

I remain a servant of God and yours, in the Spirit of St. Francis,



Rev. Francesco Patton, OFM

**Chairman of FFHL.org
Custos of the Holy Land**

(Continued from Pg 1: The Modern-Day Christian Exodus and How You Can Help)

Twilight of Christianity,” discussed the changes in political climate that have caused the Christian population from Egypt, Syria, Iraq and beyond to hastily diminish. Zakaria shared, “As recent as 1950, around 80% of Bethlehem’s population was Christian. Today, the population of Christians comprise less than 20% of the total Christian population.”

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many Christians fled Iraq out of fear. After Israel’s founding in the late 1940s, hundreds of thousands of Jews were displaced from their homes in Iraq where their families had resided for centuries. In 2014, when ISIS established its presence, things grew much worse and presented many more challenges for Christians living in the region.

“There have been very few censuses taken since the rule of Saddam Hussein. At that time, there was an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. According to data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel for 2021, Christians living in Israel are about 182,000, 1.9% of the total population. (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021)

With these staggering statistics, FFHL will continue raising awareness and funds to bring Christ’s gospel message of love and mercy to thousands of Holy Land Christians. We fund many different educational, humanitarian and housing programs. Since our founding in 1994, we have helped over 1,750 marginalized Christian students from grade school through college; assisted over 800 individuals find stable employment; provided 43 families with stable shelter; and aided thousands of others through our programs, resources and supplemental grants for urgent needs.

Through donors’ prayer and financial support, we can continue providing these essential resources and programs that enable Christians to remain and thrive in the Holy Land.

Sources:

“Fareed Zakaria GPS, On GPS: A Christian Exodus,” by Fareed Zakaria, CNN.com, December 18, 2021.
<https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2021/12/18/exp-1226-janine-di-giovanni-christians-vanishing.cnn>

“Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel in Figures: Selected Data from the Statistical Abstract of Israel,” 2021.
https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/DocLib/isr_in_n/sr_in_n21e.pdf

New Kitchen for the Boys Home in Bethlehem

This past February, Fr. Francesco Patton, OFM, Chairman of FFHL blessed the new kitchen for the Franciscan Boys Home which included new freezers, stoves, microwaves, and refrigerators. The cost for the kitchen was paid for by FFHL, Pontifical Missions, and ATS, all local charitable organizations. The Director of the Boys Home is Fr. Sandro Tomasevic, OFM and he is responsible for the thirty boys living there. Later, lunch was served for the guests.



▲ All Photos: Celebrating kitchen remodel at Franciscan Boys Home in Bethlehem

Servant Leadership – Loving God, Loving Others

How University Scholarship Program Coordinator Elie Hajjar Leads with a Servant's Heart

The Gospel of Matthew states Jesus' definitive answer for the first and greatest commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." The second commandment follows with: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matthew 22:37-39).

"I am convinced that only education can create a change in society and help people achieve their goals."

– Elie Hajjar



Loving one another is not easy. Servant leadership is found in the daily grind. It means loving one another and modeling a Christ-like spirit to others. It means seeing potential in people and working to help them develop skills and talents. It means going to work every day and using your skills to bless others. It means leading with grace, mercy and patience for people that you are influencing. It means bringing God's glory to every encounter.

You don't have to be in a place of power to be a servant leader. You can build the kingdom of God by serving others. The Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land's Elie Hajjar is a true servant leader, loving others and building the Kingdom of God through his work as University Scholarship Program Coordinator.

We recently interviewed Elie about his role, his hopes for the [University Scholarship Program](#) and the young scholars who inspire him. We invite you to join us as we get to know Elie a little better.

Q: Tell us about your background and education.

A: I am a 34-year-old accountant. I grew up in the Old City of Jerusalem, where I lived with my parents and my three sisters. My father is a full-time employee, and my mother a housewife. Being a moderate-income family did not prevent my parents from teaching me and my siblings and making all four of us well-educated children. At Bethlehem University, I studied Accounting as a major and Business Administration as a minor. Having the opportunity to work within the scholarship program at FFHL has been a great experience. Because of it, I have seen the progress of the young people in my country and the significant life changes they have made. I am convinced that only education can create a change in society and help people achieve their goals.

Q: How did you get involved with the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land and the University Scholarship Program?

A: After graduating from Bethlehem University, I started my work at the Custody of the Holy Land in 2009 as an accountant. After three years, I was also asked to work for the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land's University Scholarship program. It is a great pleasure to work for a foundation so well-known for its mission to help those in great need in the Holy Land.

Q: How has the pandemic affected education in the Holy Land? What are some of the biggest challenges facing students?

A: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not easy for students to shift into the new online method of learning, but in time they began adapting. After the COVID-19 lockdown, many families suffered economically and socially. A lot of families lost their main source of income, preventing them from providing for their basic needs. As the COVID-19 crisis continues, families are still unable to meet their monthly commitments towards utilities and rent, making it nearly impossible for many students to continue paying their university tuition fees.

Fortunately, funds raised from FFHL's generous donors afford many students opportunities to focus on their scholarly studies without concern for tuition fees. FFHL scholarship students are challenged to earn high marks, and they work hard to comply with the terms of the program, so they do not lose their scholarship.

(Continued on Pg 4)

Q: What are some of the accomplishments that you are proud of?

A: It is very important for me to see the progress of the students, particularly those who were uncertain about what to study in the beginning. After finally completing a B.A. degree, students find greater success in life and in the workplace. I have formed great relationships with the universities, making it easier now to facilitate student registration and stay current on the student's progress. It is very satisfying to know that after students graduate, they can become successful in their life and obtain high positions in society. These students are very grateful for the opportunity the scholarship program has afforded them.

Q: What are some ways that earning a scholarship for a degree in higher education helps Christians in the Holy Land?

A: Without a degree in higher education, it is very difficult to find a job. Pursuing a college degree opens doors for a brighter future.

Q: What are the greatest needs that the University Scholarship Program faces today?

A: The University Scholarship program is making very significant progress and giving students many opportunities to achieve their goals. Because this program helps decrease the unemployment rate, many students are encouraged to pursue a higher education degree. However, with limited foundation funds, not all students are able to be accepted into the program.

Q: What would you say to someone to encourage them to financially support scholarships?

A: FFHL's University Scholarship program gives hope to students in real need of college education financing. A scholarship can help future generations make a lasting impact on the world. Without the generous help of the good people who gave with love, many students wouldn't have been able to continue their education. Their lives were changed because of this program. Without a university scholarship, these students would still be relying on the church and society for social help and donations.



Scholarship Student Receives Outstanding Student Award



We are proud to recognize University Scholarship recipient Laith Abusada, for his excellent academic achievement at King Hussein School of Computing Sciences at Princess Sumaya University for Technology. Laith received the Outstanding Student award during the 2020-2021 academic year. He is sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. John R. Landon of Dallas, Texas through FFHL's University Scholarship Program. Laith shares his gratitude and appreciation in this letter of thanks. His sponsors, Mr. and Mrs. Landon, are helping him achieve his dreams.

◀ FFHL University Scholarship Student, Laith Abusada, poses with achievement award outside of school.

(Continued on Pg 5)

A Letter of Thanks from FFHL University Scholarship Student Laith

Greetings,

I hope everything is well with you. I am glad to inform you that I have received an Outstanding Student award from Princess Sumaya University for Technology. I was awarded a certificate of recognition for my academic achievement from the School of Computing Sciences at a special ceremony on November 18, 2021.

This would not have been possible without your help. Your generosity is much appreciated, and with your continued support, I will keep doing better and better.

Yours truly,

Laith Abusada



Children's Christmas Program in Bethlehem

Each year the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land gives Christmas treats to over 600 needy children in the Bethlehem area, many of which attend our Terra Santa School in Bethlehem. This year Fr. Francesco Patton, Chairman of FFHL, Fr. Peter F. Vasko, President, and Fr. Ibrahim Faltas, Superintendent of Private Schools participated by first giving out Christmas candy to all the students in the school. Later they attended a Christmas show that FFHL puts on for the younger children who are all dressed up in Santa Claus outfits. Children are invited up to the stage to sing or to dance. It is a wonderful occasion for the Christmas season.



▲ (Left to right) Fr. Ibrahim Faltas, Superintendent of Private Schools, Fr. Francesco Patton, Chairman of FFHL, Fr. Peter F. Vasko President deliver presents to children at school during Christmas celebrations.

Together
we gave.

Nov 30, 2021

Thank you!

We raised over
\$10,000 for this
campaign in 2021



GIVING
TUESDAY

Thank You! FFHL's Giving Tuesday Success

We are proud to announce that over the last three years we have accomplished the following:

- ✚ FFHL has raised \$42,710 from our GivingTuesday campaigns.
- ✚ We have 224 total donors who have contributed to our GivingTuesday campaigns.
- ✚ The average gift for our GivingTuesday campaign is \$191.

We are continually humbled by the outpouring of prayer and support from our FFHL family. Thank you for being a faithful and generous supporter of Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land. You are making a profound difference in the lives of these individuals by giving them a hopeful future.

2022 Events & Regional Updates:

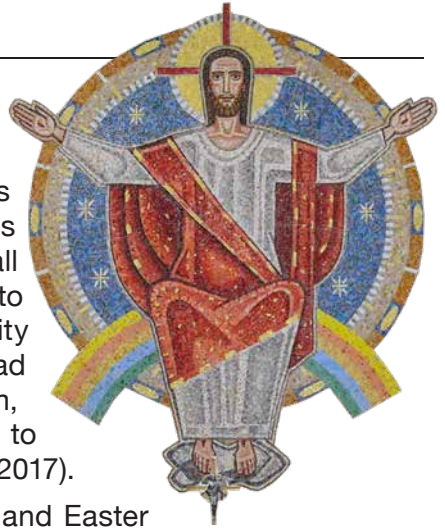


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| Apr. 26 th | Good Shepherd Society Luncheon (Dallas) |
| Sep. 10 th | Dallas Region Gala Dinner |
| Sep. 22 nd | Cradling Christianity Dinner (Columbus) |

Lent and Easter in the Holy Land

Pilgrimages are a lifeline for the many Holy Land residents who rely on tourism. At its height in 2019, tourism was booming with 4.5 million visitors and revenue of over \$7 billion, largely attributed to Christian pilgrims. In 2020, the pandemic decimated Israel's tourism industry when only a few hundred thousand visitors were able to travel to Israel. Last year, visitors climbed to 400,000, bringing in \$618 million in revenue for the region, but still far below 2019's level. FFHL hopes to begin Pilgrimages again in Fall 2022.

For Christians in the Holy Land who have endured many hardships, Lent is a time of hope and reassurance. Pope Francis explains: "Lent is a path: it leads to the triumph of mercy over all that would crush us or reduce us to something unworthy of our dignity as God's children. Lent is the road leading from slavery to freedom, from suffering to joy, from death to life" (Homily for Ash Wednesday 2017).



For the third year in a row, Lent and Easter will look very different in the Holy Land with the absence of tens of thousands of faithful pilgrims from around the world.

"Holy Week continues to play a pivotal role in Christian spirituality. It marks the culmination of salvation history; beginning with desperate suffering and ending in joyous hope," says Father Peter F. Vasko, OFM. "As a Franciscan friar who has lived and ministered in the Holy Land for the last thirty-five years, this week has particular meaning for me. We Franciscans continue the legacy of our founder and father, St. Francis of Assisi, who, some 800 years ago was entrusted with protecting the holy sites in this precious land. We also have a special calling to minister to the indigenous Christians here, those 'Guardians of Christianity' who have courageously maintained their faith and heritage over these many centuries in spite of misunderstanding, persecution, discrimination and suffering. To be in Jerusalem on Good Friday is an experience unlike any other. To join the throngs jamming the Via Dolorosa where Christ carried His cross, to stand for a moment at the first station where Jesus was scourged, crowned, and then condemned to death by Pilate is a moving encounter for any believer."



▲ Father Peter F. Vasko, OFM, President of FFHL leading 2019 pilgrimage group through sacred sights of the Holy Land.

Although due to the pandemic, Father Peter won't be able to escort pilgrims through the cramped streets of Jerusalem, or the byways of Nazareth this Easter, he looks forward to hopefully welcoming pilgrims in the Fall to see where Christ walked and experience what life is like for His followers in the Holy Land today. Please visit <https://ffhl.org/holy-land-pilgrimages> to find out more about FFHL's planned pilgrimages.

Children Without Borders - March for Peace in Bethlehem

On January 4, 2022, Christian Media Center published a story highlighting more than 500 children from FFHL's supported program, Children Without Borders' marching for peace in Bethlehem. The march started in the square of Catholic Action, continued in front of the Basilica of the Nativity and concluded at the School of the Holy Land.

Fr. Peter F. Vasko, OFM, President, FFHL and President of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports of the Palestinian Authority, along with Fr. Francesco Patton, Custos of the Holy Land and Fr. Ibrahim Faltas, President of the Children Without Borders Sports Academy, participated in the event.

(Continued on Pg 7)



▲ FFHL sponsored Children Without Borders participates in the annual March for Peace.

“These are people who have worked for peace. It is very important for our children to see this meeting, and for them to learn to work for peace as well.” – Fr. Ibrahim Faltas

In spite of war, siege, deprivation, and persecution, Children Without Borders offers peace, liberty, and camaraderie to children through the fun and fellowship of sport. Children Without Borders provides a safe and educational environment for children after school. It also provides the opportunity for these children to discover the talent given to them by God. Jerusalem has more than 300 participants and Bethlehem has more than 120 participants with three coaches, three assistant coaches and additional volunteers.

The children’s march for peace seeks to go beyond just Bethlehem’s streets and become a path to a better future for the nation.

See the full Christian Media Center article at: <https://cmc-terrasanta.org/en/media/terra-santa-news/25368/children-march-for-peace-in-bethlehem/>

Cradling Christianity: Rooted in Cause



Cradling Christianity was founded in 2006 by a small group of Catholics from Columbus, Ohio. Each founding member participated in a group pilgrimage, not knowing one another initially. During their travels, the group grew very close through their shared experiences. Being from the same general region, this small group returned home forever changed after their journey to the Holy Land. They soon realized they could not resume their normal lives without acting to bring awareness, hope and change to the struggling Christians they met on their journey. They banded together to form a collective group called Cradling Christianity. Still operating today, its mission is to raise funds for the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land to provide education, housing and employment to Christians in the Holy Land.

In a recent interview, founding members Gene and Judith Alfonsi from Dublin, Ohio shared their insight about the history of Cradling Christianity.

Cradling Christianity Launches

Gene and Judy had an opportunity to join the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem and participated in their first pilgrimage to the Holy Land, led by tour guide Fr. Peter F. Vasko. The group of 50 pilgrims embraced one other and grew very close during their time together. The Alfonsi’s describe their pilgrimage as “a selfless, enlightening experience. You can read about the Holy Land, but to have a chance to go in person is such an incredible eye-opener. It makes the Bible so real.”

Upon returning home and not knowing what steps to take, the Alfonsi’s called their group of local pilgrims. Each person knew they needed to do something to curb the tide of emigration. The pilgrims brainstormed ideas and [Cradling Christianity](#) was born.

Their first fundraising dinner event was held in May 2006, where Fr. Peter spoke about life in the Holy Land. Since then, Cradling Christianity has hosted 14 consecutive years of annual fundraising dinners. Unfortunately, the 2020 and 2021 events were canceled due to COVID-19.

Notable Success

It is largely due to the efforts of the grassroots group of individual donors that Cradling Christianity has enjoyed so much success. To date, Cradling Christianity has raised over \$1 million for Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land. Cradling Christianity has also sponsored numerous scholarship students through FFHL’s University Scholarship Program over the years.

Of the original group of founding members, sadly three have since passed away, and only a handful are still active on the committee. Previous chairs Don and Monica Brown, Chuck and Ardith Mers, Charles and Venetia Bramlage, Russ and Pat Howard with Gene and Judy played an integral part in the overall success of Cradling Christianity through their gift of time, talent and treasure. Gene has also devoted his support to FFHL as a Board Member since 2010, and currently serves on the finance committee.

The Alfonsis are excited to welcome Dee and Kris Pellissier as co-chairs for the next fundraising dinner. The Pellissiers become the sixth chairs since the organization’s founding. The Pellissiers have also had the privilege of attending a pilgrimage with Fr. Peter F. Vasko and have been touched first-hand by that experience.

If you are interested in learning more about our mission, joining an upcoming pilgrimage, or finding out how you can help stem the Christian exodus in the Holy Land, please email Shawn Lurie at slurie@ffhl.org.



Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land
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PILGRIMAGE REGISTRATION IS OPEN!

YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY STARTS HERE
VISIT THE HOLY LAND



Fall Pilgrimage: Nov 27 - Dec 7, 2022

Elevate your faith to the next level on a life-changing journey through the Holy Land. Join us on our upcoming Fall Pilgrimage. Reserve your space today. Individual and group reservations available.

(*Due to evolving government mandates and restrictions, travel dates are subject to change.)

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We Want To Hear From You!

What do you want to read about in FFHL's upcoming newsletter? Email your stories and ideas to smartini@ffhl.org. If you are interested in becoming more involved with FFHL, please contact slurie@ffhl.org.

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GIVING INCENTIVES FOR YOUR INDIVIDUAL RETIREMENT ACCOUNT

When considering the Required Minimum Distribution (RMD), there are a few important things to consider:

- ✦ Donating your RMD to a 501(c)3 is a great opportunity to increase your charitable giving and avoid heavy taxation on any amount not withdrawn. If you have an employer-sponsored retirement plan and are at the age of 72, you will have a RMD.
- ✦ Donating IRA funds you do not need is a great way to expand your philanthropic support of a cause that has personal meaning to you. RMD funds, up to \$100,000, that are donated to a charity will not be included in your taxable income.
- ✦ Calculate your RMD in advance and decide how much you are planning to donate. Once you have given your gift, make sure to include your donation on a relevant tax document when you file for your annual taxes. Planning and staying abreast of evolving tax code changes will not only provide tax benefits but will allow you to expand your charitable giving portfolio.

We are thinking of our family of supporters during these times of uncertainty and want you to know that we appreciate you. We know this is a challenging time for many people. It continues to be challenging for us too, yet we will continue pressing forward in our work and mission to preserve the Living Stones of the Holy Land. If you would like to speak to us about gift planning strategies, we are here to help.

Disclaimer: This information is provided as a public service to highlight a matter of current interest. It is not intended to constitute a full review of any subject matter, nor is it a substitute for obtaining financial or legal advice from an accountant or financial advisor, or an attorney. Information contained within was accurate at the time of publication on December 6, 2021.

Source: "Donating Your IRA Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) to Charity by <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=9221>"

