

FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION FOR THE HOLY LAND

Foundation works to preserve Christian presence in Holy Land

By Tony Gutiérrez

Special to The Texas Catholic

In the midst of ongoing conflicts in the Holy Land, a small but significant Christian community continues to survive. The Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land works to maintain that Christian presence — described as a “minority within a minority” — through education, humanitarian aid, care for shrines, and awareness of the community’s struggles.

Ahead of a fundraising dinner Sept. 12, Father John Puodziunas, O.F.M., the foundation’s president, spoke with The Texas Catholic about the foundation’s work and the importance of the Christian community.

The dinner recognized Douglas and Susan Pritchett from Fort Worth with the Pope Leo XIII Gold Cross of Honor Award for their support of the foundation.

“The idea is we want to safeguard the Christian presence. We have all these shrines; the friars have been giving care for them for 800 years, and without Christian bodies there, they become just museums,” Father Puodziunas said.

Out of a population of 10.2 million in Israel, about 1.9 % identify as Christian, most of whom are Palestinian. Most of these Christians are Catholic, between the Latin, Melkite, and Maronite Churches. Others include historical churches such as the Eastern Orthodox and Coptic, as well as Protestant and other sects. For certain holy sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Catholics share custody with other Churches.

“The mission of the foundation is to educate young Christians in the Holy Land so that they don’t feel they have to leave, and to educate them so that they can then start a business, start a life, have a career in their homeland where they have grown up,” Father Puodziunas said.

Over 30 years, the foundation has provided scholarships for more than 750 students, with a goal of 800 by the end of the year, coinciding with the Jubilee Year of St. Francis. Father Puodziunas noted that many Christian students face discrimination when trying to attend classes.

“A number of our students have to travel into Israel. They’ll come to the checkpoint — not a border, because it’s not a separate country — and they’ll be stopped; and they’ll say, ‘There will be no school for you today,’ or ‘No, you have to wait a couple hours,’ and they’ll wait three hours till the classes are over, and then they’ll let the students pass,” Father Puodziunas said.

“It’s these kind of things that get in the way of you living freely because of who you are, and



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Douglas and Susan Pritchett pose with Father John Puodziunas, O.F.M., at the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land dinner at the Dallas Country Club on Sept. 12. During the dinner, the Pritchetts were presented the Pope Leo XIII Gold Cross of Honor award.



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Pictured from left are Janelle Moore, Father John Puodziunas, O.F.M., and Abbot Peter Verhalen, O. Cist., at the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land dinner at the Dallas Country Club on Sept. 12.

more often, it’s tied to Palestinian Christians. And not just because you’re Christian; it’s more, I think, the political thing that they’re coming after.”

Education does not strictly mean a university setting. The foundation is also working to build a vocational school in Bethlehem located in the Palestinian West Bank. This would allow the students to not be stopped but also to learn vocational trades.

“If you learn a trade, you get an education; if you study in the Holy Land, there’s more of a chance that you’ll stay,” he said.

Father Puodziunas recalled visiting a few families whose neighbors had left. Upon asking if that was a common experience, he was told that many families, if they had the means to, would do the same.

“They said something that fits in almost any parent-family culture: ‘What we want for our

children is safety, security, and opportunity,’” he said.

This became the topic of Father Puodziunas’ address during the Sept. 12 dinner.

“That’s what a college education provides at a certain level. It’s not just taking care of the humanitarian need today — which is important — but it’s helping to build and supporting the presence of Christians to stay in the Holy Land,” Father Puodziunas said.

In traveling across the United States, Father Puodziunas said many people are surprised by what he shares about the Christian community.

“There was a period of time that generally no one wanted to question Israel. We felt that after the Second World War, they were given the land; and then, because of certain wars, we segregated some land as West Bank and Gaza for the Palestinians,” he



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From left, Dr. Britt Talley, Patty Daniel, Father John Puodziunas, O.F.M., and Julie and Nick Summerville pose for a photo at the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land dinner at the Dallas Country Club on Sept. 12. Talley, Daniel, and the Summervilles served as co-chairs for the event.



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Pictured from left are Gerri Noonan, Father John Puodziunas, O.F.M., and honorary dinner chairpersons Norma and Harry Longwell at the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land dinner at the Dallas Country Club on Sept. 12.

said. “They didn’t realize that just those markings didn’t solve the conflict.”

Most average people desire to live in peace with each other, Father Puodziunas said. Children for Borders, a sports program run by the friars, brings together Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

“The idea is we can show you that we can do this together. Unfortunately, they go home to environments that are much more hostile to those who are different,” he said, “but we’re able to provide a small moment of ... ‘What we hope for is possible, no matter how bad it may look.’”

The friars support several schools, such as the Magnificat Institute of Music. Out of 31 teachers, 24 are Jewish, and the student population of 220 is made up of Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

“When you look at that, our educational structure around the

Magnificat Institute of Music is one which says, ‘We can live together. We can do good things together. We can find beauty in the midst of conflict together,’” Father Puodziunas said.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS

Find more photos from the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land Dinner by scanning the QR code or by visiting thetexasatholic.smugmug.com.

