

LOYAL AND COURAGEOUS Christians in the Holy Land

As many of you are aware, I was recently blessed with a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, spending over a week in Israel. Aside from the fulfillment of a dream of many years, as both a priest and one more of the disciples of Jesus, I know that the Scriptures will never again sound or be proclaimed in the same way. One of the factors that I both surprised and concerned me was the knowledge that only 1.5% of the total population in the land where Our Lord was born and died, is Christian.

We were also told that of the 9,000 guides officially registered by the government of Israel, only nine are Catholic. Our guides, Steve and Janet Ray, who themselves are converts to Catholicism make a concerted effort to support Christian run businesses whenever they can on the pilgrimages they conduct. Our tour bus driver was Christian, our Palestinian guide was also Catholic and his parish is the Annunciation is the largest Catholic church in the Middle East.

Just listening to the different commentaries both on-site and in the bus, we became aware of some of the daily difficulties that Christian people living in the Holy Land face on a daily basis. For example, permits for construction of a home or of a simple remodeling are painfully slow in being granted or are denied over and over, and if the owner proceeds without the permits because the living conditions are intolerable in his own house, such homes are then demolished by the government.

Students who study in Palestinian schools, run in many cases by Catholic religious orders such as the Franciscans and who graduate with extremely high grades, are often denied or delayed admission to universities and other institutions of higher learning. Sadly for many, their only real option is to leave home and study abroad. Every time a family is constrained to leave, the Christian presence is less by one.

There was only one period of time dedicated to shopping for religious articles. Jerusalem crosses and articles made of olive wood were available in a Christian run store in Bethlehem that supports 65 families. While I am sure they are astute business people, and some items were perhaps unnecessarily pricey, to some degree you did not mind because you felt you were lending a supporting hand. Bear in mind that most of those who peddle religious articles on the street are not Christian.

It was also sad, I have to say, to see the town of Our Lord's birth, Bethlehem of Judea, surrounded by the high wall that has been built in the name of security. Even

in Bethlehem the Christian presence is only 32% and dwindling all the time. Intimidation comes both from the government and the non Christian community. Christians have never been part of the terror groups and so they are detested by their Muslim neighbors, while they are also harassed by the government.

We had a Passover meal in Bethlehem and I had the opportunity to sit with a Palestinian businessman who is Catholic, he told us that notwithstanding the fact that he is an Israeli citizen, he is constantly humiliated when he travels through the checkpoint in Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Although his papers are in order, he is always made to get out of the car, everything including the spare tire is checked, and the wait can be several hours. Some years ago, his brother died of a heart attack at this checkpoint waiting for an ambulance that security never let through. I have no doubt that there are many versions of every story, but these anecdotes do give an idea of how difficult the lives of His disciples have become for those who live in the land where Jesus Christ was born. Other than a litany of laments and complaints, what to do?

While, it always sounds perhaps little more than a cliché, I invite you all to pray for our brothers and sisters who struggle every day of their lives to be faithful and to survive in their own homes. I also believe, that for those who organize or participate in pilgrimages to the Holy Land, it is a worthy responsibility to ensure that from the Travel agency to the guides to the hotels and restaurants, religious articles etc, a conscious effort is made to support the Christian population.

The fact that the persecution under which they live is more subtle and less bloody than in the times of the pagan Roman empire, does not make their martyrdom any less real. As many of you should also be aware, there is a special collection in Catholic churches throughout the world for the religious sites in the Holy Land on Good Friday. As you know the numbers who attend services on Good Friday pales by comparison to the throngs of Easter Sunday, and so the assistance to the Holy sites is less perhaps than what the needs are.

Many of the non-government run schools and orphanages are in the hands of religious sisters and this a great witness. The only school in Jericho is run by a group of Franciscan sisters from Malta and the vast majority of their students are not Christian. It has also fallen on the shoulders of religious sisters to care for the mentally challenged, the elderly and the infirm, because their own communities often disown them.

Many of the religious sites that are traditionally run by the different religious denominations such as Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian or Coptic are problematic on occasion because of the tensions and lack of unity among the followers of Christ, and we should all see this as an ongoing challenge. So, while we find ourselves in full restoration mode, and all the bother and nuisance associated with cramped quarters for Mass and continued efforts to raise the necessary funds, pause for a moment and reflect on your brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

God Bless, Fr. John McCormick, Rector
Recent Pilgrim to the Holy Land with Steve & Janet Ray