

The Pearl of the Franciscan Missions

By Fr. Peter Vasko, OFM



Fr. Peter in the Holy Land with one of the workers on housing projects that provide work and affordable housing for the local Christian community couples.

In the year 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi set sail from Italy and voyaged to Acre, Palestine. The land of Palestine/the Holy Land was considered the most hallowed of any other land on earth by Francis, as it was the very land walked upon by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Although Francis welcomed martyrdom in the land where our salvation was realized, God had another plan. Francis met with the Muslim Sultan Malek-el-Kamel in Damietta, Egypt and engaged in a respectful dialog. This encounter not only resulted in an assurance of safe passage for Francis in Damietta (a huge Muslim city in Egypt and the pathway to the Holy Land) to the Christian camp but also gave an assurance of safe passage for his brothers, now referred to as the 'brothers of the cord,' to come to the Holy Land and thus beginning the Province of the Holy Land.

In 1342, Pope Clement VI mandated the friars to be the official custodians/guardians of the Holy Land and thus the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land was born. The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land or the 'Custodia di Terra Santa' continues to be the hands and feet of Jesus serving the Christian community as well as the guardians of our beloved Holy Sites marking the life of Jesus. The Franciscans in the Holy Land today indeed serve as bridges/ instruments of peace between their Jewish, Muslim and Christian brothers and sisters.

It seems that life in the Holy Land has never been without its challenges...but who would ever suspect that one day the Christian presence would be threatened and on the verge of extinction? The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land felt a great responsibility/call to respond to this crisis and in 1996; the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land (FFHL) was created and became the first organization to formally attempt to stem the massive Christian exodus from this land. When the Christian community was asked what would make them remain, they responded that if they could secure a college education in the country so that they could secure professional employment and have affordable housing, they would remain. In response, a variety of programs were created through the FFHL to assist the Christian community, in these specific areas, in their time of need.

St. Francis, himself, referred to the mission in the Holy Land as the "pearl" of the Franciscan Missions. He considered this as the primary mission for his followers because of his ardent love for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was born, ministered, died and rose from here. No other land on earth has this claim! Is Christ not saying the same to us, His Franciscan family, as He did to Francis some 800 years ago, "Rebuild My Church which is falling into ruins?" Most Church officials are saying that if something is not done to stop the Christian exodus from the Holy Land, then within 60 years our beloved Holy Sites, marking the life of Jesus, will simply become empty religious monuments and museums with no living, worshipping community! As Christians, and especially as Franciscans, we cannot allow the "Living Church" in the land of Jesus to simply fall into ruins.

We are all members of the Franciscan family and I am sure that if Francis was alive today, he would be the first to call upon all of his followers to help save the "Mother Church" which is crumbling, to make sure that we indeed have a Christian presence in the land where our Church was founded. Together as brothers and sisters in St. Francis we can work together to rebuild and preserve our Christian heritage/ presence in the land which Francis considered the 'pearl' of the Missions. This mission is our mission and this mission, your mission. Please visit the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land website to see how you/your SFO fraternity can help: www.ffhl.org

"So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith." Galatians 6:1