

Building Bridges

By Faith Libbe, SFO



This photo was taken in June at the Franciscan Family Center, when we were blessed to meet the SFOs from Bethlehem. I (Faith) am third from the left with my hands on Rose Marie, SFO's shoulders. Fadi is in the very front of the group!

The indigenous Christians of the Holy Land are often referred to as the "forgotten faithful." Many Christians in the U.S., by no fault of their own, are simply unaware that Palestinian Christians exist. I was first introduced to this beautiful population of people during my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land in May of 1997. Our guide was a Palestinian Catholic and he was the one that God used to both open my eyes to the plight of Palestinian Christians, and to touch my heart to want help them in some way. As my heart kept calling me to return to the land of Jesus, the Palestinian Christians continued to become more and more dear to me.

Ever since the Wall separating Israel from the West Bank began encircling Bethlehem (located inside the West Bank), my brothers and sisters in Christ who dwell there have weighed heavily on my heart and mind. They are separated from the rest of the world by that Wall, deprived of the basic human right of "freedom of movement." The first time I saw the Wall surrounding Bethlehem was in May of 2004. I returned to the U.S. with the hope and dream of some how "building bridges" of communication, love and...hope...so that the Bethlehem community might not feel so alone and forgotten.

Blessed to return to Bethlehem the following year, I was blessed to speak to Fr. Amjad Sabarra, OFM, (then pastor of St. Catherine's parish, adjacent to the Basilica of the Nativity) who in the midst of our conversation mentioned that there was an SFO community in Bethlehem. I discovered that Fr. Amjad

and also Sr. Maria Grech of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, worked with this local SFO community. I instantly knew that I wanted to connect with their SFOs and soon after my return to the U.S. was blessed to receive an e-mail from one of the SFOs in Bethlehem!

Yes, Sr. Maria had given a young man by the name of Fadi Gedeon my e-mail address and I was so blessed to begin communication with him! Fadi wrote that he too believes in building bridges and "making good communications" with other SFOs around the world. He also wrote that there were 40 men and women, single and married in his Bethlehem fraternity and that they pray the Liturgy of the Hours together every Sunday before Mass. He wrote that he loves being a "good working Christian man who 'fixes the Church' and who lives the Gospel, as our Father, St. Francis." Fadi signed his e-mail, "Take care and God bless, your brother Fadi Francis Gedeon, Bethlehem." We communicate till this day.

Fadi then gave my e-mail address to one of the women in his fraternity by the name of Rose Marie Nasser and we began to communicate. I once asked Rose Marie to write about life in Bethlehem and I would be happy to share it with SFOs in my Five Franciscan Martyrs Region. I was blessed to read Rose Marie's e-mail at our Annual SFO Regional Meeting just a year ago. The heart of one of our region's ministers was touched so deeply by the e-mail that her fraternity, in Dunedin, Florida, "adopted" Rose Marie's fraternity! I was so grateful to God that the building of bridges was expanding...from my personal communication with SFOs in Bethlehem, to an entire fraternity communicating with them. God is so good.



Faith Libbe, SFO in the middle of two young Palestinian Christians

But, God had more, for in His goodness, I was blessed to return to Bethlehem this past June 2008. It was on that day that I actually got to meet my brother Fadi and sister Rose Marie in person! Not only that, but they spoke to our entire pilgrimage group about the challenges of their everyday life in Bethlehem. I so love and admire the SFOs in Bethlehem. They have the same Franciscan joy in their hearts, despite the unique challenges they face while striving to live the Gospel. Can you imagine living the Gospel of love, while not being a free people, but a people under Israeli occupation? I can't imagine ...but am touched so deeply by their courage and positive spirit. At the conclusion of Fadi and Rose Marie's talk, all the SFOs in our pilgrimage group from the U.S. joined with the SFOs from Bethlehem for a group photo. What a joy...what a blessing. I cannot help but smile and thank our dear Lord for the blessing of more bridges being built that June day.

I pray that more and more bridges of peace, love and understanding will continue to be built between our "sister" SFO fraternity in Bethlehem and SFOs in Florida, across the United States and across the world. I hope our brothers and sisters in Christ and in St. Francis will never have to feel that they are alone in their struggles. May God continue to bless and protect Rose Marie, Fadi and the rest of their fraternity, as they strive to follow our Lord in the footsteps of St. Francis. May they continue to be His instruments of peace and love under such trying conditions in the little town of Bethlehem...the very town where our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ was born.

Should you or your fraternity wish to communicate with Rose Marie's and Fadi's SFO fraternity in Bethlehem, please contact me at: faithalibbe@juno.com