

In a Little Town Near Bethlehem

*Canadian Knights give hope to Christian families
by supporting students in the Holy Land*

by Marta Zaknoun

On Sept. 6, the harmonious sound of hymns in Arabic, Greek and English filled Jesus the King Melkite Catholic Church in Markham, Ontario, as more than 300 parishioners and Knights welcomed Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey of Jerusalem for a special eucharistic celebration.

Archbishop Zerey's visit marked the fifth year since Jesus the King Arab Christian Council 15045 launched its Jerusalem Students project, an initiative to help the Melkite Catholic Patriarchate in Jerusalem provide scholarships to children of needy Christian families in the Holy Land.

The project, spearheaded by Grand Knight Hikmat Dandan, was awarded the International Youth Activity Award at the 2013 Supreme Convention in San Antonio. Since its start, the initiative has invited donors in the Toronto area and beyond to sponsor students studying at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem. Archbishop Zerey traveled to the Melkite parish in September to personally deliver new student files to the sponsors and to speak about the situation of Christians in the Holy Land today.

"We are living horrible days in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq," the archbishop said in his homily. "In the name of the Church, I thank the Knights of Columbus and all the parishioners of Jesus the King who are making large efforts to help the refugees as well as the Christians in the Holy Land, especially for your donations to the students of Beit Sahour who cannot afford tuition."

HELP FOR THE HOLY LAND

The initial inspiration for the Jerusalem Students initiative came from a talk that Archbishop Zerey gave to parishioners at Jesus the King Church in 2010.

"The archbishop explained to us the hardships that families were enduring, specifically in the little town of Beit Sahour,"

recalled Dandan, who is a native of Lebanon and a Melkite Catholic. "The Greek Catholic Patriarchate School was in serious financial difficulty and might have had to close down."

Beit Sahour, whose name means "place of the night watch," is a small town two miles east of Bethlehem and five miles southeast of Jerusalem. It is the site of the "Shepherds' Fields," where, according to tradition, angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus (cf. Lk 2:8-15).

Speaking at Jesus the King Church, Archbishop Zerey said, "I always consider that our parishioners are the great-great-grandchildren of the shepherds."

With a population of approximately 14,000, Beit Sahour is 80 percent Christian and 20 percent Muslim. Residents work largely in the religious tourism industry and as artisans, using olive wood, mother of pearl and embroidery to make religious and other handmade items.

In recent times, however, many families have struggled to make ends meet. The decades-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict and a precarious economy have taken a heavy toll on people in the Holy Land. Many have emigrated, hoping to find more stability

abroad. Since 2000, the already tiny percentage of Christians in the region has halved — dropping from 2 to 1 percent.

After listening to the archbishop's presentation in 2010, Dandan felt an urgency to respond.

"I went home and as a Knight I started thinking of how I could help," he said. "As Knights, we cannot accept that the land where Jesus and the Apostles walked and preached become a 'museum of Christianity' without Christians."

One way to sustain the Christian presence in the Holy Land, Dandan realized, was to give parents hope for the future of their families. This meant helping them provide a good education for their children and supporting Christian schools.

With the archbishop's blessing, Dandan set to work by creating a website — jerusalemstudents.org — and giving





With a church steeple and the minaret of a mosque in the background, students play soccer at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem. • Opposite page: A young student writes on a whiteboard at the school.

presentations in local parishes and councils, ultimately gathering sponsors for needy students at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School in Beit Sahour.

Sponsors are asked to pledge \$500 to help families in need cover the annual tuition of approximately \$900 per student. Each sponsor then receives a student profile, including a photograph and a personal letter of gratitude. Sponsors also receive homemade cards from the student at Christmas and Easter.

According to Sawsan Istephan, principal of the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School, the school currently enrolls 655 students ranging from kindergarten through grade 12, approximately 80 percent of whom are Christians, as are most of the teachers.

“Our school strives to serve the Christian minority, preserve the Christian spirit of the school and better communicate its Gospel values,” she said.

The school follows the local curriculum and maintains the highest standards and teaching methods in the liberal arts, sci-

ence and technology. While most classes are conducted in their native language, Arabic, the students are also taught English and German from an early age.

Integral to the school’s mission is to provide an educational environment where Christian faith is cultivated and can be lived fully.

“Our students receive a strong formation in love, forgiveness, acceptance, respect and sacrifice, which are transmitted through our religious education classes, Mass and prayers in the morning,” Istephan explained. “Children who attend other schools, such as the public ones, do not receive a Christian education and are frequently deprived of it, as they must attend school on Christian holidays.”

It is also very important for parents that the school offers students the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, such as music, drama, ballet and sports programs.

“In this way,” Istephan said, “parents do not have to enroll them in other institutions or centers, and they can use the money they save on the basic necessities of life.”



Melkite Catholic Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey of Jerusalem delivers a sponsored student's file and gifts from the Holy Land to Armando Gamboa, grand knight of St. Justin Martyr Council 11708, as Ontario State Deputy Alain E. Cayer and Grand Knight Hikmat Dandan of Jesus the King Arab Council 15045 look on. • Below and opposite: Students are pictured at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School in Beit Sabour.



ARCHBISHOP ZEREY: Photo by Ingrid Punwani — STUDENTS: Photos by Afif Amireh

INVESTING IN OUR CHILDREN

So far, 40 students have been sponsored through the Jerusalem Students initiative, and 123 more still need help. The majority of sponsors thus far have been Knights — including 16 individual members and eight councils.

One such council is St. Justin Martyr Council 11708 in Unionville, Ontario, which has sponsored a boy named Ramez, now in grade 10, since 2013. Because Ramez's father suffers from a physical disability, the family has no regular income.

"When we read about Ramez on the website and his tough circumstances, we recognized that this is a real boots-on-the-ground situation," said Randy Galluzzi, financial secretary of Council 11708. "Here's an opportunity to provide support not just for one year, but through his academic career at the school."

Council 11708 currently donates \$750 for Ramez's annual tuition, and for the past two years council members have communicated with Ramez through letters and photographs. Ramez has also sent the council an olive wood crucifix and a rosary in gratitude.

Ramez's father, Imad, described what the sponsorship has meant for his son.

"Ramez feels loved and accompanied because of the sponsorship," he said. "He has gained more self-confidence, and he feels more responsible because he does not want to disappoint the people that are investing in his education."

As a graduate of the Patriarchate school himself, Imad has a keen awareness of the value of the education his son is receiving.

"This is the school I went to as a child, and I know that Ramez's capabilities can be cultivated here," he said. "It is where he can be prepared to pursue studies in all major universities in the Holy Land and abroad."

Following the Mass at Jesus the King Church in September, Ontario State Deputy Alain E. Cayer addressed the sponsors who were about to receive student files containing their personal letters.

"As you will realize today, you have made a difference in someone's life," he said, adding that the Jerusalem Students initiative is much more than a fundraising project. "This is an opportunity for Christians in North America to sustain the



presence of Christians in the Holy Land by investing in them just as they do with their own children."

Indeed, according to Galluzzi, members of Council 11708 feel as if they are supporting a member of their own family, and they are blessed to know how much their support makes a difference.

"We feel that it's like an uncle helping his nephew with his education," said Galluzzi. "It is fundamental for people who are committed to living in the Holy Land, and have been there for generations, to have the opportunity not only to survive, but to flourish, to blossom." ♦

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