



MUSEUM REVIEW

After Thirty Years, Bethlehem Museum Finally Opens

Courtesy of Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF)

On March 1, 2015, the Bethlehem Museum for History, Heritage, and Culture opened after a thirty-year hiatus. The museum – originally Palestinian ethnographer Julia Dabdoub’s dream – began as a project of the Arab Women’s Union of Bethlehem (AWU) in 1977. Over the years, different challenges kept the AWU from finishing the museum. In 2012 the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) partnered with the AWU to make this dream a reality.

HCEF is a non-profit development organization established in 1998 with the mission of preserving the presence and well-being of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land by raising global awareness of their present-day struggles and the intrinsic role they

have played in the Holy Land’s history and development. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., HCEF has a regional branch in Bethlehem.

In a span of seventeen years, HCEF has developed over twenty programs to fulfill its mission. These programs aid the Palestinian Christian population in a number of ways, including housing rehabilitation, children’s education, women’s empowerment, elderly care, financial investment, peace advocacy, job creation, and bringing Palestinian diaspora youth of all faiths back to Palestine. HCEF utilizes these programs to promote peace, justice, interfaith dialogue, and reconciliation in the Holy Land by removing the causes of suffering and replacing despair with hope, fear with human security, and

humiliation with dignity. The museum is a natural progression of this mission.

Through the Bethlehem Museum, HCEF aims to preserve the legacy of Palestinian Christians. The museum introduces all who visit Bethlehem, not only to the historical treasures of Palestine, but, more importantly, to the lifeblood of Christianity in the Holy Land: its people. They are the “living stones” who have kept the faith alive for thousands of years. The museum honors Palestinian families by recognizing and showcasing their many contributions to the Holy Land’s art and culture.

HCEF President and CEO, Rateb Y. Rabie states, “My vision for the Bethlehem Museum is not just to show the treasure of Palestine, but rather to tell the story of the people behind the Nativity. Through Bethlehem Museum, I hope to build community, show the world these treasures, and bring prosperity to the region.”

One of the few museums owned by women, the Bethlehem museum empowers women through various initiatives and creates jobs in Bethlehem. Another unique aspect of the museum is its efforts to directly engage the diaspora through two programs: Palestinian Surprises and Know Thy Heritage. The former highlights the achievement of Palestinians from all walks of life and their contribution to the respective countries they live in, while the latter empowers youth in diaspora by connecting them with their Palestinian roots and making them ambassadors of peace.

Due to the various catastrophes that have struck the Palestinian people, priceless Palestinian artifacts have been scattered throughout the world. The Bethlehem Museum has brought, and will continue to bring, these treasures home to Palestine to be restored and displayed as tangible proof of the substantial role Palestinian Christians have played in the Holy Land’s grand story.

