

# Eight Hundred Years as Custodians of the Holy Land



By Francesco Patton, OFM

During the past two years, we Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land have been celebrating the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first brothers, which took place in 1217. This year is particularly significant for us and for the entire Christian community because it marks the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the pilgrimage of peace that Saint Francis of Assisi made to the Holy Land in 1219.

Prior to visiting the holy places in Palestine, Saint Francis crossed the firing line of the combatting armies of the Franks and Arabs and then went on to meet with the Sultan of Egypt. The encounter between Saint Francis and Sultan Al-Malik al-Kamil in Damietta, Egypt is engrained in our minds because it was a meeting of peace and heralded the beginning of a dialogue between believers of different cultures and faiths. As a result of this meeting, Saint Francis was able to visit the Holy Land and make a unique pilgrimage to the various holy places that turned out to be a spiritual experience that touched his heart and soul.

This pilgrimage marked the beginning of our presence as custodians of the Holy Land given that Saint Francis is our founder. We find our way of life summarized in Chapter XVI of the *First Rule of life*, written for us by Saint Francis. He reminds us that in our day-to-day lives, we should not quarrel or enter into disputes but be witnesses to every human creature of the love of God and confess that we are Christian.

In 1342, we received the official mandate by Pope Clement VI to be custodians of the Christian holy places – in other words, to live and worship in the places that remind us of the life and Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pope also asked us to be an international brotherhood able to take care

of the local Christians as well as the pilgrims who come from many different countries. Our centuries-old mandate is quite diverse and spread out; our communities exist in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, Rhodes, Egypt, Italy, and outside the Mediterranean region.

Our international brotherhood consists of about 300 brothers who come from 45 different countries. We try to live the Franciscan life, which is first and foremost an evangelical life of prayer and fraternity at the service of the church and the people.

The activities that characterize our mission are many. First, as custodians of Christianity's holy places, we welcome pilgrims – both local and international – and provide opportunities for them to



and Nazareth. We also offer pastoral services in Roman Catholic parishes, and thus we take care of the “living stones,” the Christians of the Holy Land who live here and in adjacent countries and who often face great challenges.



Photo by Afif Amia.

nourish their faith and read the Gospel in places dedicated to such spiritual experiences. In addition, and in order to better serve the pilgrims, the custody provides affordable lodging at various Casa Nova guesthouses in important cities such as Bethlehem, Jerusalem,

Furthermore, we have a strong commitment to the field of education. Our 18 schools are recognized as a model of coexistence and interreligious harmony. We welcome 10,000 Christian and Muslim students to live and study together in friendship

and peace. We should also mention the contributions of our cultural study centers, namely the Studium Theologicum Jerosolymitanum, which offers a BA degree in theology studies, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum of the Flagellation, which offers master's and PhD degrees in Biblical studies, and the Muski Center in Cairo for Oriental Christian Studies.

We have launched the Terra Sancta Museum project in order to illustrate the Christian identity of Jerusalem, side by side with its Jewish and Islamic identities. The museum includes a multimedia section that is already functional, an archaeological section, partially opened in June, and a historical section, whose preparation is already under way.

We take pride in the Magnificat Institute, a music school that is open to young people of all faiths who appreciate music and demonstrate a special talent in this field.

Very important also is our effort in the field of social work, through which we try to sustain the Christian presence in the Holy Land by creating job opportunities and offering apartments for local Christians. During these last years, we have intensified our commitment in Syria, which is a land that is particularly important for the history of Christianity, since it was on the road to Damascus that Saint Paul was called by the risen Lord to be the Apostle to the Nations; and it

**The Order of Friars Minor, OFM, is a mendicant Catholic religious order, founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi. The order adheres to the teachings and spiritual disciplines of the founder and of his main associates and followers, such as Clare of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, and Elizabeth of Hungary, among many others.**

was from Syria that the Gospel spread in an extraordinary movement of evangelization to all the world.

The occasion of the eighth centenary of the pilgrimage of peace and of our 800 years of peaceful presence have helped us to reap the benefits and appreciate the prophetic vision of engagement between people of different civilizations and faiths. The approach of Saint Francis invites us all to enter into dialogue with others in order to cultivate a sense of harmony. For us, to be custodians means to take care of places and people.

*Francesco Patton is the Custos of the Holy Land.*



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a Happy New Year from



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